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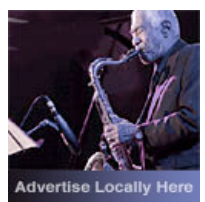
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Interview



Mike Miller
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May 2002

An Interview with Guitarist Mike Miller

By [Don Ayers](#)

Mike Miller is a guitarist whose playing and writing communicates a stunning musical universe. While much is made of individuality and originality among musicians, Miller seems beyond those qualities: he is *unlikely* in the way he defies description. Consider that Miller has worked with jazz pianist Chick Corea, diva/comedienne Bette Midler, pop craftsmen Gino Vannelli and Burton Cummings, the Los Angeles Philharmonic New Music Group, Wall of Voodoo's Stan Ridgeway, film composer and former Devo front man Mark Mothersbaugh, the Frank Zappa *Banned from Utopia* alumni band, and many others. This is a range of experience that challenges the imagination -- edgy spontaneity in Corea's electric jazz, slapstick "comedy guitar" with Bette Midler, and complex orchestration in the writing of Marc Anthony Turnage and Frank Zappa.

Then listen to his first solo CD, *Save the Moon*, which features Jimmy Johnson, Tom Brechtlein, Mitchel Forman, Peter Erskine, and Ralph Humphrey. The music on this CD reflects Miller's commitment to develop his own voice, which juggles a rich and wonderful contradiction of qualities: the raw excitement of the electric guitar with a technique that pushes the boundaries of the instrument, and a broad vocabulary with a mischievous sense of humor -- he might play a part a pianist would work out with two hands, or grace the end of a bebop phrase with a Chuck Berry lick and dip of the tremolo bar. Miller is a riveting improviser who can draw you to the edge of your seat as you follow one musical idea developing into another or bending through a series of unexpected twists and turns... and the results are complex, yet melodic and accessible. A simple path lies beneath the surface of all this activity, revealing a guitarist engaged in a playful search for constant musical growth.

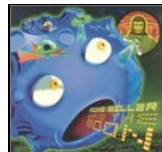
Mike Miller was born into a musical family in Sioux Falls, South Dakota on May 8th, 1953. He was the third of four bass-playing brothers, performing with his father's jazz combo at twelve. About the same time he began honing his precocious guitar chops in a series of garage bands, and at fifteen was accepted into the Sioux Falls Symphony playing string bass.

In 1972 he moved to Colorado, where he met and played with guitarists Robben Ford, Bill Frisell, and Larry Coryell. Miller also hooked up with the Fowler Brothers (of Frank Zappa fame) and recorded the album *FLY ON* as the group Air Pocket, produced by Jazz great Oliver Nelson. In 1975, he relocated to Los Angeles, collaborating with Shawn Phillips, Bennie Maupin, Tom Scott, Alphonso Johnson, Brand X, and others. Miller began eleven years of touring and recording with progressive pop artist Gino Vannelli in 1981, and contributed the Grammy-nominated composition "Elamar" to the Yellowjackets' 1982 album *Mirage a Trois*. In 1986 he started The Outsiders, releasing a live trio CD titled "Band Overboard."


Miller joined Chick Corea and the Elektric Band II in 1993 to record the Grammy-nominated album *Paint the World* and to tour the world for a year and one-half. Following his time with Corea, Miller began working in orchestral settings, performing the music of Frank Zappa as a member of Banned from Utopia (with the Seattle Symphony, the Portland Symphony and the Israeli Philharmonic), recording Joseph Curiale's guitar concerto with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, and performing as a soloist in the U.S. debut of Marc Anthony Turnage's *Blood on the Floor* with Sir Simon Rattle conducting the L.A. Philharmonic New Music Group.

More recently, Miller and his wife, performer/writer Sandra Tsing Loh, wrote and scored Oscar winner Jessica Yu's documentaries "Breathing Lessons" and "The Living Museum." Miller performed with Bette Midler in the "Divine Miss Millennium" world tour, as well as recording "Bette" with producer Don Was. Miller continues to work with film composer Mark Mothersbaugh (Universal Pictures "Rocky and Bullwinkle" and Wes Anderson's "The Royal


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Tenenbaums"), and can be heard on "No Hyenas" by Steve and Ed Fowler (www.fowlerbrothers.com), as well as a forthcoming Banned from Utopia recording.

In a recent conversation, Miller generously shared his insight on learning, working, and playing, and where and how these experiences hook up to create the music.

Your playing really covers a lot of different musical ground. How do you feel when people try to pigeonhole you in one style or another?

Thinking and labeling according to styles -- it's a terrible idea and going to throw people off. 'Hey, you've got to see this Mona Lisa -- it's a woman with a funny smile.' How many times do you go see a movie where people have told you all about it, and you don't enjoy it, because you don't see it as what it is but this baggage about what it is supposed to be? There's something to be said about just working on your strong points, but for me, I felt I would have big gaping holes in my knowledge... I didn't like going into a session and feeling stumped. I was always looking for things I was weak in and concentrating on how to do something about them, even if it was something I didn't care for, like country and western. I really tried to learn something about different kinds of music, and I picked up a healthy respect for all kinds of music by doing that. Only through researching some of this stuff, did I realize what a monster a guy like Ricky Skaggs is, and appreciate all kinds of music and what makes it authentic. Once you realize what makes a style work you realize that the guys that are really good in that field are *no slouches*. I like to mix things up but it's good to start with the authentic things.

What continues to motivate you to keep learning?

I'm the happiest when I'm working on things where I feel I'm advancing. You make so many advances early on, but after twenty or thirty years those are fewer and further between. It's very important to continue learning and *not* get to a level where you *become an expert*. The guys I respect the most are interested in and attracted to things they aren't familiar with, because they can learn something. I want as much ammo as possible going in -- I don't want to just go in with my little talent thing I worked up in South Dakota and be kind of a semi-hot blues guy. I wanted to have as much vocabulary at my command to draw on as I could.... not that I use it all the time but when I need it, it's there, so I don't get stuck looking for the right inversion, etc. It takes some thought to figure out what you want to say, to get away from what everyone else is saying... you can't just say what everyone else just said, we can all do it after it's been done, but that's not even close to the point. I wanted to find something on my own. And it's good to have experiences in life so you have something to express, not just stuff you worked up in your basement.

What specific types of things you have you studied?

[Back in the '70s] I went through a book by David Baker, "Technique for Improvisation Based on the Lydian Chromatic Concept" which was a very thorough way of looking at interval studies. Right now I'm looking at Mick Goodrick's new book (Mr. Goodchord's Almanac of Guitar Voice-Leading for the Year 2001 and Beyond, Volume I) It's really deep and thorough, the instructions are really funny, and there's some gold in there but you will have to dig it out. If something speaks to you, especially with the interval stuff, you'll say 'I've heard this a hundred times and now I know what it is.' I think by going through these things, you prepare your hand to go for things you're not sure you can pull off. The more you learn where things are on the neck, and what's possible, the more you can make a stab for things and actually pull it off. If you just stick with what you know -- like practicing a scale up and down and that's it -- you might get better at it, but there will be big holes. You have to know where the intervals lie, where the triads lie, different inversions of them, different ways of looking at the same material. I've always looked really hard at trying to find new ways to look at the same stuff. In the diatonic system you have seven notes and you can work at it and say 'I've got it' or you can look a little deeper.

I still feel like I'm still looking for weak points. I went through practicing all my stuff with the first two fingers, then the next two, and so on. Although that sounds kind of mechanical, by doing that I kind of realized how to free my hand up where I can play two or more ideas at the same time with different sections of the hand. It's so much easier on the piano, but with guitar you need to get that kind of independence in one hand.

How do you apply all of this knowledge?

The more you do ear training, the more you can keep track of what is happening, instead of having everything be a surprise when anyone does anything out of the ordinary. Your brain is able to recognize that stuff where it can be automatic: ear training is not that much different than looking at two blue shirts and knowing one is a different shade. I think it is of real value, because then you're not in the dark saying 'what the hell was that,' but instead, 'wow, he's got an Eb and an Ab against my.... that makes it lean into this kind of modal thing...' which you can choose to use if you want to: if I'm playing and the keyboardist plays another tonal center, I know what's going on there... I may not go there and play with him because he may only be playing it because it contrasts with what I'm doing. You have to pay attention so something unexpected can be incorporated, without having to check your guitar



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One element that comes through strongly in your writing and improvisation is a sense of development. How did you work on this?

I'm always looking for melody when I'm playing. [In terms of] development, I picked up a lot of things from just about everybody I like -- that kind of storytelling quality: statement, restatement, using the same shape elsewhere but inverted, changing rhythmic values on the same phrase, and all of that.

I like listening to music that contains and creates conversations. I tell myself when I'm playing to slow down. You may want to jump to the next idea, but let people get on with you so you don't lose them, I have a lot of respect and awareness about... [knowing] when to move on and when to stay put. These days, what gets me excited about improvised music is, for instance, with the Keith Jarrett Trio, when it finally moves they all move together, not like the guys play a deaf man's vamp under a solo, or the soloist does a double triple headed gainer into a glass of water while everybody else is playing funky... thinking 'we'll sit over here and ignore you until you're done.'

Music is supposed to express something besides hanging out with a bunch of guitar players trading licks. I'm more into composition and control than guitar playing, which is why I listened to so much piano music. I liked the way they approached chords and comping -- it was much more thoughtfully done -- you pick a note from up here, one from over here, and another from down here and you've got this triad instead of all these close little guitar voicings that 'everyone in class' is doing.

People seem to put 'working' musicians and 'creative' musicians in different boxes. You manage to do both, how?

You can learn from anything. There's not much to learn from a good experience, but when you go in and you're not sure what to do you'll learn things you aren't going to get anywhere else. Work-wise, I'm not a real session guy, one of those guys that gets called everyday on TV shows, movies and stuff. It's always been fringe stuff.

Gino Vanelli was one of the few guys I worked with for any length of time, almost eleven years, and he didn't tour for almost the entire time I worked with him. We would work for a couple of weeks, then back in another couple of months. He was very meticulous about a lot of things that at the time I was fairly annoyed with: how hard you hit the string, where you hit the string, how you place things, he was very distrustful of first takes ('that was perfect, do it again') but as time goes on I think it was very good for me, I learned a lot about where to place things. [Mark] Mothersbaugh, he's kind of on the outskirts, scattered and interesting, but he will give good direction, it's more interesting... like, 'we want this to be almost like a music box, no vibrato.'

One day I got called in to do a session and there were five guitar players, so I'm wondering 'what kind of weird session is this?' And I hear this guy in a nasal voice ask: 'can you get this kind of wawawawawa sound' and I look up and it's Brian Wilson. 'Yeah, I can get that sound for you.' At that point it's about orchestration, about making a full sound and getting this guy what he wants. He has a serious track record and nothing to prove to you, and if you think a guy like that doesn't deserve your respect you should go home.

I like to work for people and give them what they want but that's not all I want to do. If I get called back, it's because the producer lets me do what I can do, because he knows that I've got something appropriate for the project. I found myself fed up working for people and doing what they wanted... 'play a little SRV on this tune and some Pipeline guitar here,' and I thought 'Who am I, Rich Little?' It's when you give up and play some stock stuff you don't care about... maybe that's when a working musician becomes a non-musician. If it's a stock part I don't feel anything at all, I might do it for him, but I don't take it home and I don't think it affects me artistically. I'm not hustling after those kinds of gigs, either.

My attachment to the gig is much less if I have to play a role in which I'm kind of subservient and I don't get to do what I've been working so hard to do. Most keyboard players think that they *own* harmony... 'just play that funky note all the way through the tune, and I'll handle the harmony, I've been certified.' I would never run into that with the guys I would defer to. 'This is what I do man, either get with it or get out,' is a very 'sports attitude' I'm not crazy about it in music.

It doesn't bother me to work for a wide variety of people because, if it's not something I'm crazy about, I don't stay there for years and years. It subsidizes me playing my own stuff. What a great deal that is, how else could I afford to do it?

What kind of experience did you have working with Bette Midler?

She's very funny and I got to play all my comedy guitar stuff: wacky, over the top, rubber Hawaiian steel guitar, with a vibrato so wide you don't really know where the note is... just goof ball stuff that no one ever lets you play. Most of the jazz guys look at you and say: 'that was really funny, but don't ever play it again.' They have no appreciation of that... 'this

is very serious, this is jazz, we're supposed to be cool, I saw it in a movie once, so PLEASE NO JOKES...' but that's not me." I don't want to hear lectures all the time... 'this is the blues and we're all very blues, and now we are playing funky and aren't we funky, and here's a ballad and now we are all going to cry...' Yeah, but how about a little whack here and there? With Bette I was able to do goof ball musical jokes.

And Chick Corea?

Chick was one of the first guys I got turned-on to, and excited about, in jazz. Chick was right there: [Miles Davis'] Bitches Brew was the record that killed me. It was really exciting for me to play with him in an extended situation... trading fours and here comes that guy walking towards me with his keyboard strapped on and playing this scary stuff, and you're next -- it was a great kick in the ass. The guy is so strong. One of my favorite parts of that gig was listening to his intros., which would be completely, wildly, different each night: an unbelievably beautiful lyrical thing, then an angular 'Bartokian' mathematical thing. I asked him where these ideas were coming from, and he said: 'Sometimes I just like to put my hands down on the piano without looking and go from there,' I just rolled my eyes. 'Wow. I wouldn't try that with my brain.' This was a good band, getting away from the previous Elektric Band -- which I felt was more of a parade of soloists -- and more into improvisation, an almost 'Bitches Brew' rhythm section.

What have been your biggest recent musical challenges?

The orchestral aspect of Zappa's stuff opened up another thing for me... some of the hardest stuff I've had to play but the richest musical payoff ... not just thick and dense for it's own sake, but a very artistic idea behind the music. Amazing to get ten musicians in the same room... It was very intense played in a small club: pulling off some of the time stuff was almost athletic -- do you believe we did that and nobody fell down? Marc Anthony Turnage's 'Blood on the Floor' was the best cross I've heard between a symphony orchestra and a jazz quartet... really fun for me, another challenge -- how do you stay with a conductor? Simon Rattle's 'one' wasn't straight down, like the L.A. movie orchestra school guys, it was more a lift of the arms: this was a different set of signals than I was used to, but the orchestra was with him... and how do you lead, play slightly ahead of the group, or stay with the group in that setting?

What approach did you take in preparing and recording your new CD *Save The Moon*?

I wanted to make this album a guitar trio as much as possible so I would be able to pull it off live, and actually be able to play the stuff. I wanted to keep it simple and brought in Mitch Forman as a producer, one of my favorite keyboardists ever and he plays any style; he has a great sense of humor and gets all the musical jokes, too. Bernie Kirsch recorded it on two-inch tape, and I'm happy we did it that way, it sounds really rich, where you're not anxious to get to the next note, because it sounds really good. It was a long time coming: I think it hurt me because I wasn't playing any gigs outside of town and lost sight that of the idea that anyone would be interested in hearing this stuff. I was playing around with a Lexicon Jam Man and I ended up with ten or twenty ninety-minute cassettes full of these little snippets of music, so when I started to review cassettes and write music I ended up with sixty pieces and some of them naturally gravitated together. So I had these songs and others I had written on paper... a mixture of left and right brain work.

What gear are you using?

I'm using a Jim Tyler custom Strat with two Seymour Duncan Stacks and a Hot Rail on the bridge, a John Buscarino Strat (which is very 'jazz' sounding, a thick rich kind of tone), a '62 [Fender] Strat, and a Martin D-28, all with Dean Markley strings. I have a Mesa quad preamp with their big tube power amp, and I like to use the Line 6 Pod for live things, to plug into the effects return of whatever amplifier is there -- it gives you a good buffer between dealing with back line kind of stuff... if you want to learn to tweak the Fender line and the Ampeg line, etc., it's good, but a lot of 'tweakage;' this way you have your settings and plug in and go.

For effects I use a DBX compressor with an old Korg SDD-2000 (it has some nice dark reverbs and delays), a Goodrich volume pedal (when it works it's great, but how come nobody can seem to make a volume pedal that remains scratch free for more than exactly the warranty expiration date?), a Lexicon Jamman with the 32 second upgrade; I love these things for a sketch pad. There are some other loopers on the market but I don't think the sound quality is as good. The Line Six green looper is nice, though... good access to backwards, half to double speed, etc. That's about it. Oh, and I really like the green tortex picks: they never wear down.

What recordings do you feel best represent your playing?

Save The Moon (Mike Miller) No Hyenas (Steve & Ed Fowler) Band Overboard (The Outsiders), Paint The World (Chick Corea Elektric Band II), Mirage A Trois (Yellowjackets), Nightwalker, Black Cars, Big Dreamers Never Sleep, Inconsolable Man, Live in Montreal (Gino Vanelli), Vinnie Coliauta (Vinnie Coliauta), and Pulse Signs (Burton Cummings).



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