

MICHAEL MASSIMO

GENERAL REVIEWS

Michael Massimo: Facing Challenges **Allen Foster, Songwriter's Monthly, December 1998**

At a very young age, Michael Massimo was witnessed strumming various things around the house. He had a couple of toy guitars, but by the age of seven his parents finally gave in and bought him a real guitar. By the time he was nine, he was figuring out tunes from the radio, it didn't seem to be that hard, so he reasoned it probably wasn't that hard to write a song...so he started writing songs.

"They were terrible." Michael admitted of his first attempts. "But they got better."

By the time he was in college Michael was gigging at least once a week for such necessities as beer money and popularity. "When you have a little bit of money on campus, you can be a cool guy." Michael recalled.

One of the early challenges Massimo faced was simply remembering to get paid. He enjoyed performing so much that during those first few college gigs he would sometimes be packed and leaving before he remembered he was supposed to get money, too.

After college (and after Michael got used to getting paid for performing) another challenge appeared. This time it was the challenge of keeping a day job. "Once you realize how easy it is to make money playing, having a 'real job' is so much more of a drag." Michael explained. "I could make as much in a couple of hours as I do in a whole day at the job."

But high-paying gigs and original music did not always go hand-in-hand and Michael was forced to depend on his day job to pay for such items as the making of his two CDs: *Live In N.Y.C.* and *Precious Seconds*.

Last summer, during a period of time when he was devoting himself to writing new material, Michael ended up getting laid off from his day job. Luckily the beach house in which he was living at the time was already paid for through the summer, so he had the unique opportunity of being able to devote his full attention to his writing. This extra time allowed him the chance to explore his music and craft to new levels of intensity.

One of the aspects he explored was developing his own writing style; he decided to push himself in a new direction. "I wanted to write more stories. I wanted to write songs with more detail." Michael expressed. "One of the things I discovered was listeners like detail. They don't like general, broad, esoteric, conceptual stuff; they like things they can sink their teeth into."

An audience will instinctively assume you have lived the lead role of a story song if you have written it with enough detail and skill. For instance, in one of his songs, entitled "Lucky", Michael writes about a kind of down-on-his-luck gambler. After one café performance a little girl approached him looking very distressed and asked, "Do you really need a new pair of shoes?" That's when you know you've successfully done your job of writing a good song.

Another aspect of songwriting that Massimo investigated was the expected/unexpected ratio. Michael explained: "I went to a songwriting seminar recently and we were talking about devices that songwriters use to make a hit song. Now whenever I'm listening to the radio, I hear all these devices. But when do you start to become too predictable? You have to throw some curves at the audience, but you can't make it too complicated or the average listener won't enjoy it."

One of the ways Michael tried to come up with accessible yet unpredictable songs was to put less focus on the key and more focus on binding the chord progressions together by use of tools such as common tones. For instance, one progression on his current album leads from B to Gmaj7 to E which works because the chords all share the common tone of "B".

Michael's current album, *Precious Seconds*, was recorded with mostly studio musicians. This presented Michael with a new hurdle to overcome: "The first CD [Live In N.Y.C.] was just me playing live," he explained. "Now we were going into the studio and we needed parts, so I had to sit down and say, 'What sounds do I want where?'"

In one section Michael decided he wanted strings, so the engineer said, "Well, write them." Massimo had never written string parts before, so he had to sit down at the piano, plunk out the parts and actually write the music for the string players to read.

However, Michael admitted some of the best moments on the album weren't achieved by exploring techniques or painstakingly writing out precise parts, they were just accidents. On the last beat of one of the songs on the album Michael broke a string. "That 'pop' was perfect," he smiled, "I couldn't have planned that any better."

So from toy guitars to scoring string sections, Michael Massimo has met and successfully overcome a variety of challenges in his musical career. When the going got rough and he found himself questioning why he was doing this crazy thing, Michael turned to a book he highly recommends entitled *The Artist's Way* by Julia Cameron. "If you ignore your creativity you become a miserable person." Massimo explained. "That book helped me get back in touch with writing. When it becomes 'this is what I want to do with my life' you'd better figure out how to consistently make good music. You have to figure out how to do it and do it well."

Michael Massimo: Letting the gift present itself

Coffeehouse Crier, April 1998

This year will mark the release of a third CD for 28-year-old singer-songwriter Michael Massimo. *Precious Seconds*, due out next month, will follow his 1997 release, *Live In N.Y.C.*, which, Derick Evans of the *Musician's* exchange commented, has melodies that "rank with the best ever played on radio."

The Edison, N.J. native worked on Wall Street in bond pricing when first out of college but decided it wasn't the thing for a devoted songwriter and moved into the field of advertising. Recently he provided *Music Among Friends* with some interview "copy" on his life and music.

Tell us about your musical background.

Been playing guitar for 21 years, taking lessons through college, where I studied the classical technique that influences the way I fingerpick today, although mostly I do a lot of percussive strumming. Started writing songs since discovering the great singer-songwriters of the '70s.

How would you label your music?

Contemporary acoustic.

Which artists have been big influences?

James Taylor, America, Dan Fogelberg, Carole King, The Carpenters, Yes, Jackson Browne.

Which lately?

Pat Metheny, Stone Temple Pilots, Davis Wilcox, Del Amitri.

What music did you listen to as a youth?

Basically the early influences I mentioned. Also Styx, Kansas, Billy Joel, Beatles.

What kind of music did you first start to play, and what kind of bands were you in?

I tried to play the music I was listening to at the time. I can remember buying America, James Taylor, Carole King, Seals & Crofts, Jim Croce and Eagles songbooks and trying to learn all the songs, some of which I cover occasionally even today. I was only in one band, during high school. It was a popular rock outfit. We were OK, even had some decent original stuff, but the other members had other plans about life (lawyers, dentists,

etc.). No one was as serious about it as I was.

When and why did you start writing songs?

As a kid I would just sit in my room and noodle about. eventually I started forming actual songs. (Kind of like how I write today!) I probably started writing in the first place because I was inspired by the way other people's music had made me feel, and I thought it would be really something to be able to touch people in that way with something I had written. I've always been very introspective; it's a natural thing for me to write my thoughts down. It helps me feel better to get stuff out of my head and onto paper.

When do you compose? Where?

It can be anywhere if I can put myself in the right frame of mind. I usually try to do that by spending idle time alone by myself, and when I can be relaxed enough to let my mind wander, ideas present themselves. I like to go to parks, the beach, someplace scenic. Driving my car is also a favorite. I always have pen and paper with me wherever I go. Lately the challenge is just to find the idle time.

What experiences do you draw from when writing songs?

I used to write about personal things, love, philosophy, but try to do it in such a way that it would seem universal. But I've changed my mind a little about that. I still write those kinds of songs but now I've also shifted my focus outward instead of inward. I've been writing some story songs, and it's been a relief to write some fiction. I can say whatever I want; it's a story I've created from scratch. I also think rich detail is important. People like details. You should be able to see the story as it unfolds in your head. Recently I've just been collecting images around me for later use.

What is the driving force or inspiration behind your music?

It's actually a very spiritual thing for me. I think that if you're given a gift, some kind of talent, no matter what it is, it's your obligation to use it to its fullest. That's a way of saying thanks. I want to write timeless music that matters, that moves people, makes them think. And the only way to get better at it is to keep writing. Music can be very healing, and if someone comes away from one of my shows feeling better, that makes me feel good, too. That's why I often write about overcoming adversity, triumph over conflict, basic human issues stuff. Of course, the childhood rock-and-roll star fantasy still lingers, too.

Where are you heading musically?

I'm putting together a band to play the new music from the upcoming CD. I'm also arranging older stuff for a band. I want it to be more of a collaborative musical effort. It's sometimes tiring to be the whole show. I want to have fun playing music with other people. Although I will always have a fondness for the softer side of things, inside I think there's a rock band that wants to be let out to play. Musically I see myself getting more progressive, jazz-like, with harmonies: James Taylor meets Yes meets Metheny meets Carpenters.

Michael Massimo: Live and Personal

Eric Harabadian, The Renegade, November 1997

In today's world, dominated by hip-hop syncopations, industrial machinations, and hardcore bombast, the term "singer-songwriter" tends to evoke thoughts of music past. One looks to the seventies, in particular, when emerging talents like Carole King, Carly Simon, James Taylor and Jim Croce were coming into their own. Well, for twenty-something Michael Massimo, these are just some of the essential people who helped shape his own musical world.

The New Jersey native began guitar at age seven and has never looked back since. "I'm pretty much the maverick, black sheep in my family," says Michael. "Some family members may have taken up some instrument in school but not to the degree that I've taken it to." Since recently being laid off as an employee at a New York advertising agency, Massimo seized the opportunity to pursue his dream, going full time with music. He has subsequently been keeping quite busy as a solo performer, working various coffeehouses, bookstores, nightclubs, colleges and record stores throughout New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania and Connecticut.

Michael has also released two recordings. A promotional cassette called Perspective and a new CD entitled Live In N.Y.C. As the title suggests, it features the vocalist/guitarist in fine form, pouring his singular heart out over very personal and insightful material. "I've been trying to change my writing style in recent

months,” says Massimo. “Initially, songwriting was like therapy. My forte is love songs and philosophical songs, but they were always coming out too personal. Sometimes you just get tired of talking about yourself for so long. I’m now trying to narrow my focus, writing more story songs with fully developed characters. I also want to write more about the broader world around me.”

His self-described “contemporary acoustic” style is self-assured and dynamic, as evidenced by his live CD. Michael employs sophisticated technique on his Martin acoustic, juxtaposing rich tonal variations, bell-like harmonies, and delicate arpeggios with ecstatic chordal explorations and passionate singing. Currently, Massimo is wrapping up performance commitments before taking a few months off to record in Florida.

“The engineer who recorded the live album is a college buddy of mine,” explains the singer. “He moved down to Florida and opened a recording studio. I told him I was planning a new album, and he invited me down. He knows my music, and I wanted to record in a different location so it seemed like the thing to do. “ The new album, slated for a February ’98 release, will be more rock-oriented, targeted at both AOR and AAA radio markets. He’s also putting together a back-up band in January with plans to spend the next year touring extensively throughout New Jersey, New York, Delaware, Washington D.C. and Maryland.

“Basically, I see music as a spiritual kind of thing,” confesses Massimo. “It makes me feel better and is very healing.”

Something To Say

Chris Jordan, The Home News & Tribune, February 14, 1997

Being a singer-songwriter is a double-edged sword for Michael Massimo.

“There are good acts doing what I’m doing so that opens the door; people are more receptive,” Massimo said. “But now everybody has a guitar so there’s kind of a glut in the market.” Massimo will bring his guitar and voice to the Court Tavern’s upstairs room in New Brunswick on Thursday night for a free performance.

“I was doing it before it became popular,” Massimo, 27, said of the current revival or acoustic-based music. Recently, singer-songwriters such as Jewel, Ani DiFranco and Evan Dando have renewed the form and the rise of the coffeehouse scene have given an outlet for many lesser-known singer-songwriters. “It’s good because people are concentrating on the songs and listening to what they have to say. That’s what singer-songwriters are all about; that’s why they’ve emerged as a force.”

Massimo has a CD called *Live In N.Y.C.* which illustrates his clear robust style of playing and hints at influences such as Dan Fogelberg and James Taylor. “The Journey Is Divine” is brisk and exuberant and Massimo shows fantastic control of his voice on the pretty and melodic “Love Is”. The delicate “Only You” is reminiscent of Jim Croce. The CD was recorded live in New York’s Bitter End and Downtime clubs.

Massimo, 27, was born in Edison and participated in various musical pursuits while growing up. When 16, Massimo took second place in the Garden State Talent Expo, which included a performance at the then-titled Garden State Arts Center in Holmdel. He attended Wagner College on Staten Island and started playing solo acoustic shows there. He’s been in bands before and is considering forming another one, albeit with some trepidation. “My experience with bands is they don’t care about it as much as you do,” Massimo said.

Guitarist Has No Time To Fret

Elias Holtzman, The Home News & Tribune, January 9, 1997

Meet Michael Massimo of Edison, singer-songwriter.

He’s the kid from down the block.

Only he’s not a kid anymore

Michael is 27, quiet, well-spoken, likable and darkly handsome with a Prince Valiant haircut that seems to be no impediment to his day job in an advertising agency in New York.

For now, he's holding onto his day job.

Michael is in one of the toughest games going—getting promoters to schedule him into their clubs. But it is a job he does with relish. One thing he is not short on is persistence and an ability to sell himself and his songs, which is a quality necessary in making it.

And Michael plans to make it.

He thinks about it all his waking hours.

His motto seems to be—in his own words—“Have guitar, will travel.”

His guitar is an acoustic Martin, which he uses in conjunction with his Guild 12-string at his performances. Michael performs at bookstores, coffeehouses and clubs in New Jersey and surrounding states.

He is one of two children of Alfred and Elizabeth “Liz” Massimo, transplanted New Yorkers from Brooklyn. Michael's dad is a tool and mold maker in Cranford, and his mom assistant to the chief operating officer of a company in Edison. Together, they have proudly watched the growth of their son and his drive towards performing and perfection.

Michael is a 1987 graduate of Bishop Ahr High School, Edison, and graduated in 1991 from Wagner College in Staten Island, N.Y., as a finance major. His first job after graduation was on Wall Street with a bond trading company, and he was doing well, he says, except, that “the songs were going out of my head.” He lasted six months.

He knew that big money in the future or not, Wall Street was not his street. His was the “Street of Dreams”.

A “headhunter” suggested advertising, and that's what Michael has been doing the past four years. Every weekday morning, Michael gets on the 8:47 a.m. train at the Metuchen station and head into New York's Penn Station.

Many days, especially if the weather is good, he will walk to his office at Angotti, Thomas, Hedge Inc. at 42nd and Park, talking to himself all the while, and perhaps dreaming up some new lyrics for another song.

“I work in print traffic and deal with all the little details of making a print ad,” he says. “I baby-sit an ad from beginning to end.”

Working in the print media is very helpful to advancing his career, Michael says. It allows him the convenience of printing up schedules of his next appearances, which he does with a professional panache. He's also applied his advertising savvy to his promotional material, listing an 800 number where his album can be ordered—(800) 641-8995—and also listing radio stations in New Jersey, New York, Connecticut and Pennsylvania that can be called to request his songs.

A lot of the business aspect in his finance education has come in handy. “Music is a business, too,” he says. “Essentially, what I'm trying to do is sell myself as an artist.”

Selling himself is essentially a one-person operation: “I do the sound. I write the music. I perform. I do the management, the booking, the promotion.”

Helping as a publicist is Justine Bevan of South Plainfield, a former writer for Hit Parader, a rock publication.

“I believe there's a place for people like Michael,” she says. “It's a win-win situation. Music like his never goes out of style.”

What is music like his? Massimo admits to not being a traditionalist. Nor does he write songs with a story line, such as the folkies do. His songs are mostly about his own feelings. His influences, he says, are singer-songwriters of the '70s such as James Taylor, Dan Fogelberg, Carole King and Carly Simon.

His persistence—and the fact that he was local—paid off in a booking this past Saturday night, when he played the Mine Street Coffeehouse in New Brunswick, normally a folk showcase.

Originally turned down by Mine Street manager-promoter Bob Yahn because he did not fit the standards of a traditional folk singer, Michael was penciled in by Yahn as weather insurance. Yahn felt it might be too chancy to begin the New Year having to cancel because a folkie from a distance could not make it in because of the weather. After the performance, Yahn likened his first impression of Michael's performance and lyrics to that of pop-rock star Billy Joel.

“I'll take it,” says Michael.

About his songs, Michael says: "I think the idea is to be as genuine as possible, so people can believe what I'm telling them."

"A lot of my writing is what I need to hear myself. I write about truth, love, exploring, desire, romance..."

Some of his titles: "Restless Ones", "Free", "Everything", "My Own Reality" and "Come Back New". All of these are on a cassette, Perspective, which can be regarded as promotional, since it also has printed on it: "For bookings and info call: (908) 548-4324."

The confidence and presentation a singer-songwriter exudes may make all the difference in the world, according to Stephanie P. Ledgin, editor and publisher of Traditional MusicLine, a comprehensive monthly calendar publication that lists concerts, festivals and dance in various types of traditional and contemporary folk music in all of the Northeast.

Ledgin, who knows her music, is a faculty member at Rutgers University's Douglass College, where she is the director and technical advisor of the New Jersey Folk Festival and teaches the technical side of how to run a festival. She also is the personal manager of Beppe Gambetta, a phenomenal Italian acoustic guitarist and singer, whose innate talent is bolstered by a supreme confidence bordering on chutzpah. Beppe, shortly after his first arrival in the States from Genoa, Italy, where he still lives, called up well-known artists and persuaded them to allow him to record with them. He tours here three or four times a year.

"Look at Beppe", Stephanie says. "He barely spoke English when I met him. But he was talented and mastered the art of the all-encompassing picture. That's what you have to learn when you're out there as an artist trying to make it."

"It is tough," Michael concedes. "But it's a business of relationships you make with people. It's all in how you deal with people." Massimo has played a number of other venues—coffeehouses and bookstores and folk places—such as the Bitter End in the Village, Downtime on 30th St. and Eighth Avenue and the Lounge on 72nd Street and Columbus Avenue.

Michael started playing when he was 7 years old, using a guitar which was a hand-me-down from a cousin who had given up on his lessons. He used to strum the guitar and entertain his sister, Elise Marie, now a physical therapist in Albany, N.Y., who also was musically inclined.

At Wagner College, he took lessons in classical guitar, which helps him in his finger picking, although his playing includes a combination of subtle finger picking and dynamic strumming.

Greg Stier of Metuchen, a singer-songwriter himself who writes songs in the "story" line, has chosen a life in music that still allows him a chance to be with his family of a wife and two young children.

Stier is a manager at the Sam Ash music store on Lincoln Highway in Edison and has a clientele of at least a dozen young singer-songwriters daily.

Greg has played the coffeehouses and clubs and knows how tough a road it can be. But there are compensations, he notes.

Stier quotes poet Donald Hall: "when I was 20, I wrote poetry because I was 20. Now, at 40, I write poetry because I am poet." Stier, who is 42, is a musician. He plays and performs because he is a musician.

"It's a harder hustle these days," says Stier. "It's a very courageous thing (Massimo) is doing. If he believes he's good, I hope he scores big time."

Michael also has appeared on Mark Corso's "Homemade Music Show", now beginning its ninth year on the Rutgers radio station WRSU-FM (88.7), every Sunday morning from 10 to noon. Mark, who has seen his share of singer-songwriters, likes to give young people a chance to show off their capabilities. He remembers Massimo's visit.

"He has a big voice," Mark says, stressing the word "big". "He really projects well. He seems comfortable and self-assured."

Corso points out that singer-songwriters sing for a very selective audience.

"They're saying things that need to be heard, need to be said, coming from the heart. I like to say, it is cerebral, not visceral, music of the head, not of the gut."

Massimo has a new CD, produced last year, called "Live In N.Y.C." It includes 11 of his songs and come in a professional-looking jacket with pictures of Michael in the city on the front and the back. Michael wrote

the songs, sang them and planned and designed the CD jacket. "I lean more toward the introspective stuff," he says. "Lately I've been trying to broaden my focus to include more topics. I'm trying to grow as an artist."

"He's asked me what kind of car I want when he makes it," says his dad. "He's a good boy."

Michael asked his mom the same question. "I told him I wanted a Mercedes coupe," his mother says.

"It's yours," Michael responded.

Coming On Strong

Al Sullivan, Hudson Current, February 1, 1995

Michael Massimo has played acoustic guitar for 17 years, and although he has the full, competent sound of a veteran, he is just now making the inroads on the New York music scene. For Hudson County residents looking for a hot new brand of folk pop, Massimo will appear at Maxwell's on Feb. 7 at 8:30 p.m.

His solo acoustic shows are known for high energy and a percussive strumming style. Although his press package claims a "soulful delivery of insightful lyrics", the songs on his new tape release, *Perspective*, have a penetrating sense of reality that seems to contradict his suburban background.

One critic said Massimo was a "tad too earnest". Yet he is intelligent, professional and accessible. There is violence in the words, and pain in the delivery, underlined by a defiance that flashes back to James Dean movies in the 1950s and Peter Fonda's *Easy Rider* from 1969.

Critics label him folk rock, and he says that he's influenced by the early 1970s classics James Taylor, Dan Fogelberg, Carole King, Paul Simon and others. Yet nothing about the five-song independent tape sampler is old-fashioned, despite his 1970s musical influences.

"My songs are largely taken from my own experience," Massimo says. "I'm dealing with things that go on in my life and that I think go on in other people's lives, too. It's my job as a songwriter to encapsulate those feelings which other people feel but can't put their finger on."

One song, "Restless Ones" has heavy Spanish guitar overtones, with the hard downstroke that gives Spanish acoustic music its energy. The song recaptures the vocal anthems that have been absent since the mid-1970s and offers social comments on the new headlong crash of modern society with lyrics like: "live fast, die young, these are the cries of the restless ones/So much energy and nowhere to run." Massimo's songs focus on today's problems in a style of yesterday, with the still-stark social perspective that contemporary artists and institutions are trying to regain.

While not exactly a child prodigy, Massimo, an Edison native, did make a splash at the Garden State Arts Center when he was 16. He also won awards in Billboard Songwriter's contest and the American Song Festival. Critics have called him a talented control freak, who plays every instrument, sings every song, designs his own packages and—takes his own photographs for the press releases. He laughs about the press releases because his full-time gig is with a Manhattan advertising agency, where he has learned all he needs to do for self-promotion, a fact that partly explains how a musician out of the heart of the Jersey suburbs has begun to make noise in the New York music scene. Early on, he said he performed largely in the New Brunswick area, covering the Central Jersey scene. Over the last few years, he's been showcasing himself as a singer-songwriter in the New York City clubs.

"I'm trying to spread out and cover a wider area," he says, noting he is scheduled to appear at the Bitter End in March. He said the real boost to his career came during his four-year stint at Wagner College on Staten Island when he played the hip Bay Street scene as a part time job.

Although Massimo plays all the instruments and does all the promotional work, the tape, produced by Ernie Jackson, was recorded in a friend's apartment on an eight-track recording set-up. Now, with newly acquired, more sophisticated digital equipment Massimo says that his next release will have even more impact.

"With more tracks we'll have less loss of quality in the mixdown," he says.

Self-critical at some of the cuts, he says he is surprised he managed to get as good a sound from the primitive equipment as he did. Now with digital technology, his upcoming fresh batch of tunes should have the polished quality record companies need. He said he's now polishing up his work before approaching record companies.

"Companies used to nurture performers along," he says. "But now, they want to hear something really polished. they don't seem to want to work as much with musicians, but want someone that's ready to go."

Massimo expects to play some new material at Maxwell's as well as songs from his tape release. He also tells people to expect a few cover tunes thrown in for fun.