

A black and white photograph of a city street scene. In the foreground, a large, riveted metal structure, possibly a bridge or a large piece of machinery, dominates the left side. In the background, a dense urban skyline is visible, featuring several skyscrapers, including the prominent, pointed top of the Transamerica Pyramid. The scene is captured from a low angle, looking up towards the buildings. The overall atmosphere is industrial and urban.

**Misha Mengelberg
Two Days In Chicago
Studio**

Two Days in Chicago

Stelae are stone, marble, or sometimes wood slabs, imbedded upright in the ground, which were carved with pictures or inscribed with language or hieroglyphs, usually for ceremonial or ritual documentation. They were used in such far-reaching and distinctive cultures as the ancient Mayan, Asian, and Greek. The nature of their carvings varies in shape, design, and imagery, ranging from abstract to representational, narrative to poetic.

In his study of stelae, commenting upon the difficulty in interpreting the specific carvings, Victor Segalen has written, “Linked by laws as clear as classical thought and as simple as musical numbers, the characters follow one another, cling together, and interweave to form an irreversible web, unyielding even to the hand that wove it. No sooner inscribed in the surface—which they penetrate with intelligence—than, stripped of the inessentials of shifting human intelligence, they become the stone of which they take the grain. Hence the hard composition, the density, the internal equilibrium, and the angular shapes: attributes as essential as geometry to the crystal. Hence

their defiance of those who would learn their secret. They scorn to be read. They are indifferent to the changing accents and syllables in which they are rendered from province to province. They do not express, they signify, they exist.”

Imagine, for a moment, the CD as a kind of contemporary version of the stela, a permanent marker on which we carve indecipherable characters (numbers) that reveal sounds intended to resonate through time, documenting the ritual of musical performance. After listening carefully to the long *Chicago Solo* (is it a composition? improvisation? both?) on the second of these two CDs, Segalen’s words seem to accurately describe Misha Mengelberg’s music, and the process used to create it. Though there initially seems to be no overriding principle or method involved, the notes are not struck at random—they are sounded with a penetrating intelligence that appears to be clear and simple, even as they reject any familiar form, and seem to follow one another, clinging together as they weave an irreversible musical web, one defined by its own density, geometry, and internal equilibrium. The piano’s tone is like the grain of the stone, becoming an indivisible part of the character of each note. And Mengelberg’s music is anti-expressive, secretive, affirming existence over essence. You might think of him as an Abstract Dada Pragmatist.

As a card-carrying iconoclast (pardon the oxymoron), Mengelberg might scoff at this kind of interpretation, just as in his role of composer/improviser he scorns being categorized (other of his roles include the Nichols, Ellington,

and Monk scholar, and the teacher whose subjects include Monteverdi and other Renaissance polyphonists). His defiance in the face of musical conventions manifests itself in music that is indifferent to the changing accents and styles of composition *and* improvisation (free improvisation has its tacit rules too, that vary from province to province). A clue to his anti-expressionist nature is revealed in his remarks to interviewer Dan Warburton, that to him composition is about “speculation,” and further “I use all my skills to make situations as chaotic as possible ... maybe it’s not chaos I’m looking for, but...I want to amuse myself somehow.”

Amusement, of course, still implies an inspirational visit from one of the creative Muses; however, Mengelberg’s Muses are equally unpredictable. “If you asked who my inspirations are in music, I would say more Marcel Duchamp than Igor Stravinsky,” he confessed to Warburton, and he has admitted to Kevin Whitehead his belief that Dada and Surrealism are “...the most profound things added to the possibilities of this century.” In one sense, his incorporation of Weillian musical theater, popular waltzes, marches, Classical Era filigree, dramatic eruptions, absurdist humor, and sheer noise in his compositions for the ICP Orchestra, for example, is the musical equivalent of Duchampian “ready-mades” (not to mention evoking Satie’s and other scores for Dada theatrical presentations), and in another sense Surrealism fuels his free associative solo improvising, which is like simultaneously constructing and devising an escape from a labyrinth—itsself a popular image among Surrealist artists like Max Ernst and Giorgio de Chirico.

“I don’t give a damn for the method alone—whether it’s improvisation or notation or whatever. When musical thought is interesting, that’s the important thing.... I like to think about the whole musical field on which you have thoughts, and might have something to add.” Left to his own

spontaneous devices—that is, playing solo piano—he connects ideas without artifice or edifice, free of rhetoric or virtuosic gestures. Looking over his shoulder as he plays is like watching a tone scientist over his 88 test tubes, mixing a bit of this and that, instantly analyzing and then combining new elements to gauge their response and ultimate effect. Most importantly, you can *hear* him listening as he works.

I make a distinction between Mengelberg in his differing roles because this visit to Chicago—represented by the live concert which fills one CD and the subsequent studio session organized and piloted by producer John Corbett collected on the second CD—is a rare opportunity to hear him at work in several of these multiple guises. When working with other musicians in a spontaneous setting, he is liable to be more insidious than commandeering—that is, it isn’t necessary for him to determine the musical direction, but he will inevitably find a subtle way to affect from within what otherwise would be a completely democratic consensus. Hear, for example, the pair of long quartet improvisations featuring tenor saxist Fred Anderson—the kind of rhapsodic, romantic, energetic, epic improvisers in whose company Mengelberg seldom now finds himself (although don’t forget his trio days with Peter Brötzmann). In *Chicago Quartet 1*, the pianist explodes with an uncharacteristic barrage of sustained “energy” chording, and after the music subsides into a period of calm resilience it is Mengelberg who instigates the return to uptempo, high energy impulses. *Chicago Quartet 2* finds the four eventually agreeing on an unexpected groove, but even among these spontaneous gestures it’s possible to hear how the pianist keeps the music afloat on a raft of melodic intimations—articulating the difference between “improvising” and “spontaneously composing.”

Mengelberg’s role in the more concise trio settings allow him to be less deliberate and more capricious; he

can elaborate on otherwise fluctuating details, engage the others in contrapuntal sparring, issue telegraphic Morse code asides, contradict group empathy for the sake of healthy friction, and offer incongruous suggestions to upset the music's precarious balance (just prior to the take of *Chicago Trio 1*, perhaps with tongue-in-cheek he suggested to cellist Fred Lonberg-Holm "...play some Brahms"—this was, after all, the instrumentation of Brahms' autumnal Trio op. 114). This is Mengelberg as ensemble pianist, partner in crime, improvising strategist, and arch-objectivist. In environments like this, it's tempting to focus solely on the piano as it creates marvelously squirrely details, darting and lingering among the instrumental foliage.

Then there's Mengelberg the slight-of-hand artist with familiar repertoire. He sets to *Body and Soul* with clinical attention and a surgeon's scalpel, as Ab Baars carries on an audible love/hate relationship with the jazz tenor saxophone tradition. But Mengelberg playing Monk is uncanny. In my opinion there's no one who has divined more of the compositional mindset and implanted into his fingers the angular intervals, harmonic circuitry, rhythmic accents, the splayed chords and splashed clusters, and those signature split-second timing variances of Thelonious Monk. Here he rides along on Hamid Drake's buoyant, Ed Blackwell-like multi-limbed polyrhythms (*Eronel*), coaxes Ken Vandermark's "Rouse-

through-the-looking-glass" saxophone (*Off Minor*), and modulates through '*Round Midnight* in major and minor modes to illustrate a compositional concept. Of course, Monk is never completely out of Mengelberg's mind, so Monkian ideas may be heard at any time, in any environment—not the least of which is *Chicago Solo*, which in its "one thing leads to another" deconstruction of the 18th century toccata or fantasia may be cosmically joined to, again, Satie's obsessively meandering Rosicrucian-influenced early (pre-1900) piano music as well as those precious samples of Monk's free-associating at the keyboard, *Functional* and *Chordially*.

Yogi Berra once said, "You've got to be very careful if you don't know where you're going, because you might not get there." (Sometimes, thought is travel.) Misha Mengelberg came to Chicago for two days, made some music with a host of local musicians and visiting Dutch players, and went home. Which leaves us with...what? Memories, certainly, but fortunately there's this stela left behind, these two CDs, containing a timeless message that anyone with ears can hear, now and in the future. Sounds that do not express, they signify, they exist.

Misha Mengelberg

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Two Days In Chicago
Studio

Misha Mengelberg *piano*
Fred Anderson *tenor saxophone*
Ab Baars *clarinet, tenor saxophone*
Ken Vandermark *tenor saxophone*
Fred Lonberg-Holm *cello*
Wilbert de Jooode *contrabass*
Kent Kessler *contrabass*
Hamid Drake *drums*
Martin van Duynhoven *drums*

All compositions are by the groups indicated unless otherwise specified.

Recorded by John McCortney at AirWave Studio, Chicago, on October 12, 1998; Mix and new CD-master by Peter Pfister. Liner notes by Art Lange; Cover photo by Jean-Paul Brun; Graphic concept by fuhrer vienna; Produced by John Corbett; Executive production by Bernhard „Benne“ Vischer, Christian C. Dalucas & Werner X. Uehlinger.

Special thanks to Fred Anderson and the staff of the Velvet Lounge, the Chicago International Film Festival, the Beautiful Sound, the Netherland-America Foundation, Andrew Choate, and Susanna von Canon.

2018, 2nd edition remastered

Printed by Gantenbein AG, CH-4144 Arlesheim

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File under: Jazz/Free Improvisation

1	Eronel <i>by Thelonious Monk</i> (Mengelberg/Vandermark/Drake) ISRC CH 131.1901604	4:35
2	Chicago Trio 1 ISRC CH 131.1901605	5:10
3	Chicago Trio 2 ISRC CH 131.1901606	5:08
4	Chicago Trio 3 (Mengelberg/Baars/Lonberg-Holm) ISRC CH 131.1901607	5:01
5	Off Minor <i>by Thelonious Monk</i> (Mengelberg/Vandermark/Drake) ISRC CH 131.1901608	5:09
6	Chicago Quartet 1 ISRC CH 131.1901609	12:31
7	Chicago Quartet 2 (Mengelberg/Anderson/Kessler/Drake) ISRC CH 131.1901610	14:33
8	Chicago Trio 4 (Mengelberg/de Jooode/van Duynhoven) ISRC CH 131.1901611	5:13
9	Chicago Quartet 3 ISRC CH 131.1901612	5:52
10	Chicago Quartet 4 (Mengelberg/Lonberg-Holm/de Jooode/van Duynhoven) ISRC CH 131.1901613	4:49
Total Time DDD ²⁴ Bit		68:06

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Misha Mengelberg · Two Days In Chicago · Studio



**Misha Mengelberg
Two Days In Chicago
Live**

Brian Morton, September 27, 2018

Two Days in Chicago

In 1979, Misha Mengelberg played piano on an album by saxophonist and multi-instrumentalist Keshavan Maslak. It isn't one of the best-known items in Mengelberg's discography, but its title fits him perfectly, even if he doesn't play on the title track, which is Maslak solo. It's called *Humanplexity*, and it's how I've thought of Misha ever since. He was a deeply intelligent man, who knew his way round the 20th century avant-garde but who always played with a profound and sometimes self-mocking humanity and playfulness. The last time I saw him, he was already in the grip of Alzheimer's disease. When words failed him, he would fill the gaps by singing or whistling.

It made me remember that he had started out his recording career not just playing with a famous American who like Messiaen had taken music lessons from the birds, but also – typical of Misha – duetting with an actual bird. The early recording of *Epistrophy* with Eric Dolphy, with whom Misha went on to record the so-called *Last Date*, was paired with his collaboration with Eeko, his wife's African grey parrot. Misha claimed that the bird hated him. I came to realise that some musicians, if not actually hating Mengelberg, found him too mischievous, a prankster who was also much cleverer than them.

He was seemingly destined for a career in music, though he did start out by studying architecture, only switching to music theory and composition at the Royal Conservatory in Amsterdam in 1958, when he was already 23. Misja (originally so spelt) was born in Kiev, in the Ukraine, on June 5, 1935. His father Karel was a film composer and conductor, his mother Rahel a harpist; that she was also German presented a problem for the family as hostility to the German people grew in the Soviet Socialist Republics. Fortunately, there was family in the Netherlands, where Misja's uncle Willem Mengelberg was conductor of the mighty Concertgebouw Orchestra. The Mengelbergs returned to Holland in 1938, which must have felt like jumping out of the frying pan and into the fire.



The son of the family studied soberly, but began to develop a parallel career as a jazz pianist, combining an interest in bebop that was most idiosyncratically expressed in “Hypochristmutreefuzz” on *Last Date*, a theme that sounds so “Dolphy” now it is still rather startling to recognise that Eric didn’t write it. That date at the VARA Studio in Hilversum on June 2, 1964 is also celebrated as the first recorded encounter of Mengelberg and percussionist fellow-spirit Han Bennink, another fearsome brain contained in a childlike spirit.

Both men were drawn into the Fluxus-influenced world of “happenings” and performance art best expressed in the famous *Flux Festival Nieuwste Muziek en Anti-Muziek* (“The latest music and anti-music”) festival which happened at the Kurzaal in Scheveningen some months after the Dolphy session. Working as a duo and in trio with saxophonist Willem Breuker, they developed a reputation for combining experimental improvisation with physical comedy. There was a Year Zero feel to Dutch music after the war, symbolised in part by the loss of all of composer Willem Pijper’s published works in the Nazi bombardment of Rotterdam. It left behind a sense that music could be reconstructed from the bottom up. This spirit lay behind the creation in 1967 of the Instant Composers Pool (ICP), which became in various form a key outlet for Mengelberg’s creativity for much of the rest of his life. To begin with, it was simply a duo, but Misha and Han gradually brought in collaborators, including the Danish saxophonist John Tchicai, the German Peter Brötzmann, and cellist Tristan Honsinger, together with other British and European players such as Derek Bailey (who ran his own cross-fertilising Company events), Evan Parker, Paul Rutherford, Dudu Pukwana and the American but French-resident Steve Lacy.

Mengelberg’s piano playing was, as with so many keyboard players of that generation, a hybrid of Duke Ellington and Thelonious Monk influences, and his style of composition often resembled a more radical, arguably more Euro-

pean, version of Monk's spiky melodic and rhythmic cells. Mengelberg sometimes expressed suspicion of free improvisation, preferring the notion of instant composition in the moment, but even when he wrote formal music for other hands, there was usually some element of improvisation involved. The 1988 solo album *Impromptus*, released like much of his work on the ICP imprint, took a well-attested classical form and melded it with elements of post-bop jazz. As time went by and the modern jazz tradition began to become part of a heritage industry, Mengelberg took renewed interest in the bop repertory, curating a Monk/Herbie Nichols tribute with the ICP Orchestra and collaborating with Anthony Braxton on a Charlie Parker programme. He also worked in duo with flugelhorn virtuoso and composer Franz Koglmann on four tracks for *L'Heure Bleue*. The last two records were released on hatART.

Mengelberg had been involved with Louis Andriessen and Peter Schat in the Studio for Electro-Instrumental Music (STEIM) but never gave himself wholeheartedly to electronics, preferring the physical immediacy of the piano keyboard and pedals. His pedal work alone deserves study. Misha had a way of damping then releasing notes that created effects far more subtle than anything possible on a sampling keyboard. He was never a piano snob, preferring like Ran Blake to spend some time with a piano before performing and adapting his performance to its intrinsic voice and peccadilloes. And far from rejecting club performance as beneath his dignity as a composer, he helped in 1973 to found the Bimhuis, one of Europe's most celebrated jazz spots.

The association with Bennink remained the key to his gig diary. Both men seemed most at home when working together, whether as a duo or in the company of others, and their many records, which outnumber Mengelberg solo performances, represent the lasting legacy of a genuinely creative partnership. Misha's last years were shadowed by illness, but his spirit was undimmed and his role as elder statesman of Dutch and European jazz widely acknowledged. I once sat with him and listened to one of the *Impromptus*, preparing to ask some questions about technique. Halfway through, he began to sing a second part, in quite a different metre, full of little slides and abrupt halts but still resolutely "pianistic". Whatever I had been about to ask him was gone, lost in wonder and the sheer delight of being in his creative presence.

Misha Mengelberg

Misha Mengelberg
Two Days In Chicago
Live

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Fred Anderson *tenor saxophone*
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Wilbert de Jooode *contrabass*
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Hamid Drake *drums*
Martin van Duynhoven *drums*

All compositions are by the groups indicated unless otherwise specified.

Recorded live by Malachi Ritscher/Savage Sound Syndicate at the Velvet Lounge, Chicago, on October 11, 1998 during the 34th Chicago International Film Festival; Mix and new CD-master by Peter Pfister; Liner notes by Brian Morton; Cover photo by Jean-Paul Brun; Liner photo by John Corbett; Graphic concept by fuhrer vienna; Produced by John Corbett; Executive production by Bernhard „Benne“ Vischer, Christian C. Dalucas & Werner X. Uehlinger.

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1	Chicago Solo <i>by Misha Mengelberg</i> ISRC CH 131.1901614	27:10
2	'Round Midnight <i>by Thelonious Monk</i> ISRC CH 131.1901615	2:59
3	Chicago Duo ISRC CH 131.1901616	12:18
4	Rollo 2 <i>by Misha Mengelberg</i> ISRC CH 131.1901617	4:17
5	Body And Soul <i>by Heyman/Sour/Eyton/Green</i> (Mengelberg/Baars) ISRC CH 131.1901618	6:55
Total Time DDD ²⁴ Bit		53:43

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