

Recordedness - Ben Gerstein

This interview slightly differs from the others, as it does not focus on a specific recording. Ben Gerstein maintains a regular and highly diverse practice of recording, filming and documenting his work. Focusing on only one aspect would omit the rest of his practice, as these different approaches are deeply interconnected.

To gain an overview of Ben Gerstein's wide range of works and experiments, please visit his website <https://bengerstein.com/>

Frantz Loriot: Could you introduce yourself and tell us what your practices are?

Ben Gerstein: I am a musician and artist from Santa Barbara, California. I was based in New York City from 1995-2020, collaborating primarily as a trombonist in music exploring improvisation and composition. Music has always been in my blood. It began for me as a child with jazz and classical music, when eventually I took after my father on trombone.



My immediate family has all been musicians (piano, trombone, violin, and voice), and it branches out from there. (On my mother's side in Los Angeles, saxophonist Lee Konitz was a grand uncle, son of my grandmother's sister; on my father's side, his mother Faye was a classical pianist and teacher from Brooklyn. She led a trio in the early '30s which aired at Radio City Music Hall every week.) I had many opportunities to perform and work with other musicians while growing up, and had many great teachers. It was all of this that eventually brought me to New York City when I was 17, moving to Harlem and attending the Manhattan School of Music as a jazz major from 1995-99. I made acquaintance there with many musicians I would remain close with through to the end of my NY residency and beyond. I moved back to California in 2020 and currently reside in Ojai and Santa Barbara, where I continue my practice(s), different adventures with my wife, and teach music and movement to

children and families in a couple of different studios, their homes, and different public and private schools in Santa Barbara and Ventura counties.

My relationship to music has of course changed a lot over the many years, yet improvisation and compositional experimentation have remained constant throughout. I continue to evolve the connection with my trombone, among other things, and prefer most often to practice outdoors, be it by beach, river, or road. Physical exercise is also an essential component and ground to what I do. (You have to be in good shape to teach children every day!) In general, musically speaking, practice is on a day-by-day basis, adjusting accordingly. I continue to learn about slowing down, making more space, and taking pressure off. But there **is** music every day, and different experiences to stir up healthy possibilities. Field recording is also an integral extension whenever the time calls for it or the ideas come. But now that I think of it, just about everything I record these days is some form of field recording. I love observing, documenting and experimenting with sound and visual footage from life. I believe practice is always related to acknowledging and feeling gratitude for what we have.



Ojai, CA



Santa Barbara, CA

FL: You have a pretty big recording and filming activity. While listening or watching your documents, there is always some kind of concept or notion or parameter behind it which is pushed and shown. It feels to me that these documents are all, in a way, a composition or some kind of composed works. On the other hand, you also work a lot as an improviser and in improvised situations. You are also a great trombonist and performer. When I heard you playing trombone with your own personal projects (from duos to bigger ensembles), all of them were improvised music, the focus being on improvisation.

BG: The filming/recording activities are all a form of music-making for me. I love imagining new things to see and hear. Sound always has a visual possibility, and that counterpoint is always running in the back of my mind, so I look to explore ways to see and hear more, and how the two work together. So, in that sense, a conception, idea, or composition certainly can come into play. But this can also arise suddenly and unexpectedly from an occurrence taking place right in front of me. That could be an animal, a view, an illusion, an idea, an experimental urge... Video camera and audio recorders are always with me when I go out. Ever since I was young, I've been interested in recording, beginning with silent films and cassettes, then VHS, and of course on into the digital age with MiniDiscs, camcorders, and then the portable field recorders we now have. We're so fortunate to be able to work and create so easily. To have the ability and independence to record, practice, experiment with and document our work so freely, the process expands all the more, the antennae further extend... It all feels connected to improvisation on different planes, and continues to resource and regenerate my inspiration.

Music and sound can bring us to engage more deeply with what we're seeing, and vice versa. A compositional process can sometimes feel like the most personal and poetic representation

of life at that time. Improvisation and composition feel synonymous to me, it's hard to say what's what. It's a dance of decisions, amounts of things, timings, and always feels like an important discovery, a portal. Artist Residency life. We create out of wherever we go. I practice to stay open and not limit myself to any notion of what I "should" be doing as a "musician" per say. I want to allow whatever it is to expand fully.

So many different artists come to mind whose recording/documentation practices deeply inspired me and affirmed something vital about independence, spirit, originality, and artistic development on a high level. Artists whose life examples empower us to establish a creative life in which we feel fulfilling self-reliant.

Stepping back and looking objectively, I don't feel the notion of "abstract" even applies anymore. Everything's relative to the evolution of where we are and our abilities to discern and allow it into play. Artistically speaking, everything can become anything – it's all so multidimensional. We decide when, where, and with what to stop. We are the mediums. Everything is Warmup into the day leading us onward, and we never quite know what will come. We're out in the field, doing our thing, connecting in practice. That's my approach to collaborative life, feeling that spiritual, motivational, and healing human journey together.



Montaña de Oro State Park, Los Osos, CA

FL: You also paint and draw, write poetry, and take pictures. You have developed this curious practice with photocopy machines and you had this passion for goggles. How do these different practices relate to each other? How do they influence one another? I have the impression all these practices sharpen a practice of deep listening.

BG: Exploring other artistic mediums comes from regularly tapping into artists, history and culture that encourage curiosity, education, experimentation, dreaming, and laughter, and it

helps to balance out my life. I think it's good to explore many different things, to live life as the creative workshop it is, and really steep oneself in the arts and sciences. It's a human experiment and evolution in consciousness. Everything helps everything. How we explore seeing, hearing, building and feeling form indeed sharpens a practice of deep listening, as well as deep touching.



Ojai

FL: How do you work on the editing of your videos? Do you find ideas while doing it or do you think previously how to perform, keeping in mind the way you want to edit them?

BG: Sometimes the editing of videos is very simple, clear and straightforward. Maybe I just want to speed something up or slow it down, or put it in reverse. Other times it could be more complicated, or a longer process with many different drafts. It depends. Often I just start imagining something, maybe ridiculous, intriguing, or complex, and consider what I'd need to do to make it happen, and what sort of process it could entail. I'll blow on its potential in my mind – the wheres, whens and hows – and consider the steps I'd need to take. It's an exciting synthesis that comes together for me, and then I just need to see results! I love that process. Also making a "[music video](#)" to music that I'm connecting with deeply, that's playing into my life. Something very powerful can happen, especially when using footage of nature. A good example of this is also my collaboration with friend, percussionist/composer Flin van Hemmen. From time to time he sends me audio of recent music he's composed which always inspires the visual. It's a special relationship, and we have an old history of improvising and performing together in NY. Other times, with my own projects, I'll have a very clear vision about something I want to do and just go straight to it. Or, maybe it's an idea for another time, and I make a note and wait, letting that inspiration stew for some while. Whatever it is, I usually get clear on the editing process of it before sitting down at the computer, and consider

how far things can go. It always feels good, that moment in the end when everything comes together.



Ojai



Santa Barbara

FL: You told me about the big influence photography and pictures have on your work. You've mentioned specifically the works from photographer Ansel Adams. Could you tell us more why this medium is so important to you and why Ansel Adams' works were particularly important?

BG: In the 80s, before seriously taking to trombone, I was very inspired by the history of images in magazines and books, and loved the camera as an instrument/tool to appreciate life with, capturing special moments, or aspiring to make art and look at things in a unique way. Of course when developing film, the results are also unpredictable and delayed, which is what I began with. I took art classes at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, my father also had a good eye, and I had a Hebrew teacher from Israel who inspired me. We used to wander around town together taking pictures. I grew up seeing Ansel Adams' photography a lot because he was friends with my grandfather, Ira Katz, my mother's father. Ira was a chemist based in Glendale, CA, who invented a lot of special effects for movies as well as for different events and educational settings. There was a solution he made for developing film which Adams liked. Ira had a few signed books of his photography around the house, and so I felt a closeness there. I was always captivated by the quality of those black-and-white images of nature. It felt like the reality of being an artist was very much within reach. When my family would take long road trips, one of my favorite things to do was wander off with the camera and tripod. That passion for photography of course set the stage for my later interests in video. I wanted pictures to have sound!



1989

FL: You have revisited a lot of classical music repertoire through different forms. Playing/doubling violin concertos with the trombone – even playing different interpretations! Stravinsky's piano concerto, Nancarrow's or Chopin's pieces on the drums, doubling voices, etc. What are you looking for when you do this? And what does recording these experiences mean to you?

BG: These recordings you mention, from years ago, were inspired by particular performances/albums which beckoned me to practice the music more deeply. I wanted to learn the expression fully, play something new and challenging and bring it through my body, becoming more resourced in bigger ways. The process of re-recording, reconstructing, or re-representing a piece on trombone or drums always gave me the opportunity to touch on particular aspects of the music and performance that touched me, and that I wanted to come more into contact with and bring out in my own way, with my own sound. What better way to learn a piece than to play every part? That was definitely my motivation for doing something like [Stravinsky's *Movements for Piano and Orchestra*](#). That practice was also another way to rehearse or go into studio, raising the bar in terms of what I would strive for. That sort of work/project, when the time is right, can be wonderful to have around, and of course not something one finishes then and there. It can take days, weeks. Some of these works that you named were also coming from a period in NY when I was learning from a lot of composers in new ways or for the first time. It was exciting. A festival! I remember sitting next to Elliott Carter at a performance of his music at Columbia University, just watching him the entire time while he listened. I'll never forget that experience, among others. There were some all-night concerts of Indian classical music too which were life changing. It was all so relevant, connected and alive. I'm grateful I was able to be in NY then. On the Upper West Side of Manhattan around where I'd also often be for work, I'd stumble across different albums in the thrift shops and streets. The apartment I had on 181st street became my ultimate music library gymnasium. Those years meant a lot – that intense commitment to music, art, practice, collaboration and performance above all else. It was with me everywhere I went. At

the same time, that was the time for it! Everything changes and grows, life moves on, and I'm honestly so glad to be out of NYC and living where I am now, doing what I'm doing, as hard as this journey has also been.

FL: You often go into nature and have a very strong relation to it. You have recorded a lot in nature playing with it and also just nature itself, practicing field recordings. What fascinates you about it and in it?

BG: Being out in nature refreshes body, mind, and soul. Deeper realizations rise up. Artist Residency = Earth Residency. When practicing an instrument outdoors, especially at the beach or a place where I can really project and move, everything opens up on a totally different level than if indoors. Different dimensions get touched on and cleared in the warmup. I feel like saying for a brass player in particular it's so supportive, but of course for anyone – with or without an instrument! Life without time in nature is inconceivable. It's a whole-body affair with the sound and energy to see where it needs to go, especially if I haven't played for some days. I need to pace myself, and being outside helps that.

Towards the end of college, around 1998/99, when I was living around the corner from the Manhattan School of Music on Claremont Avenue, I realized that there was something much healthier I could get to on the trombone when practicing in the park that I couldn't inside of my small, one room apartment. Things shifted dramatically when I started making a point of getting to a particular open-grass spot in Riverside Park where I felt both a connection to the earth through my bare feet, and also a much more open outlook onto life, the journey, and the energy of the day. It felt like music and practice were connecting more to the world, nature, and life, than if enclosed in a confined, indoor space. Also, when I'd then go home to California for breaks from the city, I'd get to the beach as often as possible to practice there, and that increasingly changed the way I approached what I was doing. After graduating from MSM, I moved up to Inwood, and then Washington Heights, which were both very close to the Hudson River. It became a search to find the best outdoor practice spot, and eventually I found it right alongside the river, at what's now the Hudson River Greenway. And from there, it was then a big, dynamic open space directly beneath the George Washington Bridge, overlooking the highway heading south. That was a very powerful, inspiring place to warmup from, and it served me well for quite a few years. I recently released an album on Bandcamp comprised of voice memos I made on my mobile phone from there during practice: [*G.W. Bridge NYC Trombone practice voice memos, 2010-15.*](#)

Listening to music outdoors too, projecting it from speakers, I also get unique inspiration on something I can do with it. Or sometimes that's just it itself, a sound installation sitting there, maybe on some rocks in the middle of the river in a beautiful environment that couldn't care less about it. I love that. It can be a surreal experience. I even feel like a transplanted human sound installation-body, filled with myths, invisible history, invisible relationships...

“A man cannot realize the power of his visions until he has performed them on the earth for the people [earth] to see [hear].” - Black Elk.

There is so much inspiring, transformative music and sound that has everything to do with nature, the outdoors, ritual, religion, dance, meditation, animals, the elements; the movements, projections and signals of sound, communication, energy...

A friend of mine based in Australia – Khristos Nizamis – has an extraordinary nature field recording practice which explores consciousness, abilities to perceive, listen, and experience... I discovered his work years ago through SoundCloud [[@HearingBeings](#)], and

our correspondence grew and eventually brought us to collaborate on a recording together: [*Liminal Spaces: An Exploratory Voyage. Transition 1*](#). I recorded my part not long after moving out from NY, so it holds a particular significance. I was in a very existential place, and felt I broke through into something that was utterly sincere and stripped away. My body was almost crying out to release it. It was done in an abandoned parking garage during the pandemic at Santa Barbara City College. I'm grateful to have been able to do it. Listening to the recordings Khristos publishes on his channel remains a continual inspiration to me.

Years ago, back in New York, I also collaborated a lot with bassist/composer [Garth Stevenson](#). A dear friend to this day, he and I share a deep appreciation for what can happen when you take the instrument outdoors and start working with your sound there, merging with the environment, and how it can grow and deepen the music and expand the personal, instrumental experience. His own music is also a very special example of that, and it's not surprising that he's also been doing a lot of music for movies. He and I would make a point of driving upstate to the forest and recording our improvisations there. It would be a cleanse for both of us, and a reminder of what was most important, and why we do what we do. Same with saxophonist [Jonathan Moritz](#). We played a lot in many different improvisational contexts and had great getaways into nature where we'd take our horns out and really explore the sounds and energy. It was always so fun, revitalizing, and confirming. Those times are some of my fondest memories from that era.

My wife, [Seshen](#), is also deeply inspired and informed by nature and how it has shaped her practice(s). Originally from Japan, when we met in 2015, she was living in Oslo, Norway, developing her artistic path as a vocalist, dancer, and healer. We had a voice and trombone duo which we called *Ishindenshin* (a Japanese idiom which denotes deep interpersonal communication through unspoken words and mutual understanding). We explored and cultivated our improvisation together and performed extensively there, recording an album in 2018, "[Excursion | Oslo](#)". It's three tracks: a 30-minute improvisation bookended by two recordings we made of birds on her balcony in the middle of the night. The messages and atmospheres of nature and how it communicates were very influential to what we did and believed in. We took an incredible field recording trip to Borneo back in 2019. [[SoundCloud playlist](#) | [YouTube playlist](#).] Her Master's thesis from 2020 at the Norwegian Academy of Music -- "Improvisation, Nature, Japan, and Performance" – is a profound work. I'll be forever blessed by those years we shared together there.



Maridalen, Oslo, Norway (2019)

Recently, I've also taken it upon myself to help preserve and disseminate the rare recordings of shakuhachi player, [Watazumi Doso Roshi](#) (1911-1992). [[YouTube playlist](#)] His playing draws total inspiration from a life committed to practicing in/with nature. There were also some beautiful, rare videos of outdoor Vietnamese "minority" and traditional music I had which I found so inspiring, but also important to archive so that others could get to see and hear, so I [compiled them together](#)... I love sharing these things, for many reasons. [Many other special or rare albums](#) too. Music which is at the heart of what continues to move and uplift me.

One will always have new experiences in nature, even if it's a place frequented regularly. For me, it cleanses musical associations, conditioning, and transforms relationships, especially with self. Whenever I first get somewhere to practice, there's a ritual of arrival, stretching, integrating, and sometimes recording audio/video of the surroundings... It's all the musical unfolding out into the day and warmup way of connecting to where and what I am.



Morro Bay, CA

FL: According to you, what is the purpose of the act of recording?

BG: The act of recording is an essential part of musical and artistic practice and, oftentimes, simply the means itself for the realization. Recording for me means taking an initiative, exploring a documentation, a curiosity, or a hold on a time, place, or event, or for further creative use at another time. The act of recording can also be purely experimental, sudden, with also unexpected results, like when leaving the recorder outside overnight to capture the nature sound for many hours. You never know what you'll get. By the act of recording and pressing "start", I feel it as a way of activating, turning on, or announcing silently that a "performance" of some kind has begun. Something shifts in the air. The power of intention. The recording device as witness. We are conducting or facilitating an event...





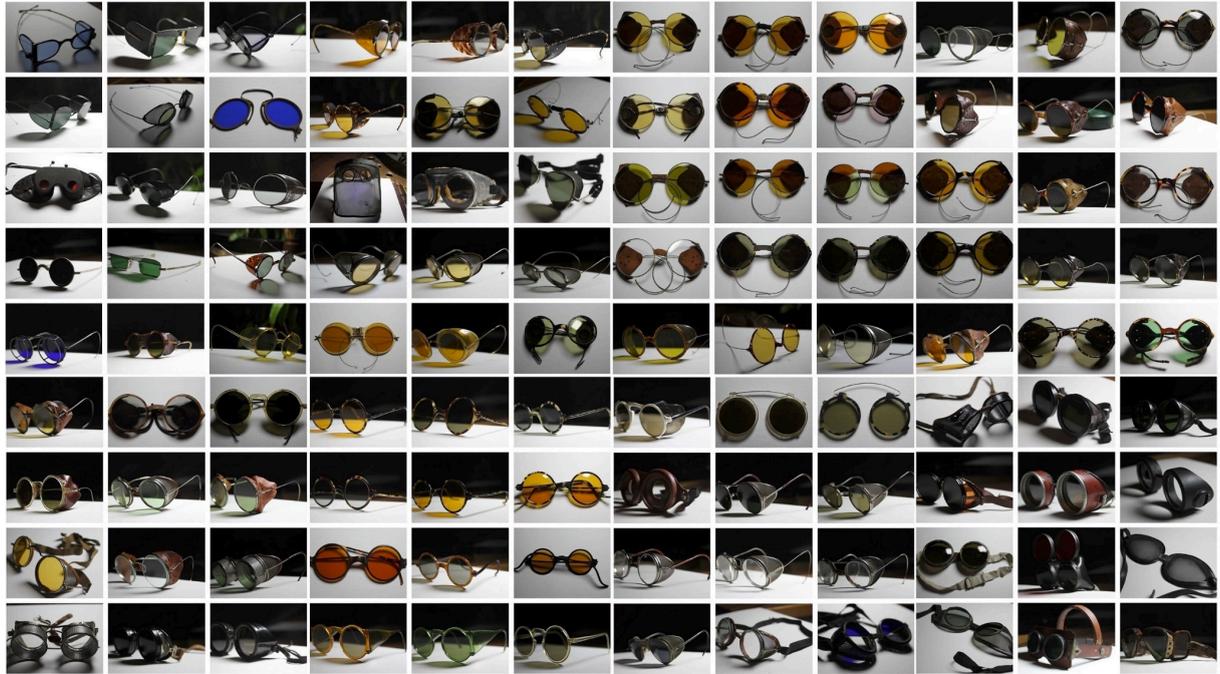
FL: During our conversations, you have talked a lot about awareness and consciousness. What is your understanding of these specific notions and what are your main influences?

BG: Certainly there could be a lot to say regarding this, and I feel I have said some here already... A big influence has also been sitting meditation... It touches the roots of how and why we live and perceive reality, the experience in our body, and our place in it. There are so many histories and teachings along these lines which have been important to me. Another influence is listening to a lot of nature field recordings, the experience of different noises, the way animals communicate, the way sounds flow and coexist... [[Antarctic sounds playlist](#)] I feel it all heightens consciousness and awareness of the orchestrations in life we are constantly with. The exploration and study of music from all over the world will also always continue to expand awareness. And lately, working with babies, children and parents in music has also been transformative.

FL: While living in NYC, you had this big passion for goggles. What was so attractive to you about them? How did they influence your musicality, if they did?

BG: Around 20 years ago, I became particularly curious about certain unique, protective eyewear I would see in old photographs. I was then also discovering the Komuso monks of Japan who wore baskets on their heads while playing the shakuhachi. Through some combination of the two, I felt the desire for something like that in my own practice. I was very drawn to the monks' reasons for wearing those baskets. So I started having fun, painting the lenses of cheap plastic safety glasses and goggles, and wearing them while I'd play. Then one day, looking up "antique goggles" on eBay, it exploded open a whole world of curiosity. I couldn't hold back, and over the subsequent decade put together quite [a collection](#). A pair was never so expensive, and they were made all over the world during the past 150 years. Beautiful, unique pieces which are such a pleasure to wear, each holding some mysterious history. Like the transportive experience of listening to an old gramophone or cylinder, but for

the eyes. The timing in which I discovered all of this was also when I was becoming so fascinated by the early record players and mechanical instruments. It all felt connected. Finding this unique niche in history — studying, collecting, and incorporating it into play, was just another ar(t)cheology in the grand scheme of things. From a musical and artistic standpoint, the experience of discovering this eyewear history liberated me all the more into the renaissance life this is.



This written interview took place in 2024/26.