

**Michael Coleman & Ben Goldberg  
Practitioner**

Interview with Sam Kulik

*Michael Coleman is a musician and engineer who has split his career between Oakland and New York City, bringing him in contact with a great variety of musicians in both roles and locations. One of his frequent collaborators is Ben Goldberg, with whom he produced the album [Practitioner](#), which is the subject of this conversation. The album's composed material comes from a suite of Steve Lacy pieces from the 1980s called Hocus Pocus - Book 'H' of "Practitioners," which Lacy wrote as a series of exercises and studies for his own saxophone playing and released on LP in 1985. Ben and Michael's 2018 CD release on BAG Production Records (wonderfully packaged with an attached set of baseball-style cards featuring original artwork and poetry) uses a meticulous approach to editing and postproduction to combine Lacy's written material with their own improvisations in a flowing, many-layered sound environment. The result—certainly worth your listen—is a unique product of their musical openness and the use of recording as a medium of its own.*

*Practitioner streams [here](#) and has a lovely video [here](#) (a film by Dana Lyn)*

**Sam Kulik:** *I'd like you to write about your history of learning to play your instruments and your history of learning your engineering skills. Where has there been overlap and where has one skill influenced how you approach the other? Traditionally these are separate vocations, and most people who specialize in one are not expert in the other. Musicality is what they ostensibly have in common, so I'm especially interested in what aspects of your own musicianship have been more influenced by playing instruments and which have been more informed by lessons learned in the engineering booth.*

**Michael Coleman:** I started with piano lessons when I was 8. My first teacher really encouraged me to compose my own music and improvise and I always preferred doing that to learning classical pieces. I played in rock bands in high school and got really into jazz when I was about 17. My high school MIDI teacher (we had a MIDI studio in my high school!) was a jazz pianist and happened to be my neighbor. He really got me started on transcribing solos and really listening to that music. I went to Oberlin and pursued music there but felt that I didn't really need a music degree and went for a history degree instead. When I graduated, my aim was to become a great jazz pianist and so I kept working on that music and took any gig that helped me learn more and gave me experience in that world. Around that time, I started a rock band with a songwriter named Ben Urwand. The bass player in the band, Mark Allen-Piccolo, had a bunch of old synthesizers in his parents' attic so I started to experiment with using them in the band and that was the beginning of my love affair with synths and effects. From that point on, I started to use electric pianos, organs and synths in any project I could and also began doing a lot of free improvisation with these instruments in a wide variety of settings, from free jazz to pure noise. Coincidentally, that same bass player with the synths is a recording engineer and recorded our rock band at his parents' home for several years.

I think that my interest in recording and engineering came from that time and I learned a lot from Mark. We shared a practice space and he let me use all of his gear to record myself. Between recording my own music in my space and working on a ton of records with the great Eli Crews at his studio in Oakland, I began to get a feel for engineering and I constantly bugged Eli and Mark for information. When I left Oakland for Brooklyn, I found myself working as the studio manager at Figure 8 Recording and I started to work as a house engineer there. Through that work, I've gotten to record and mix with many great musicians and it's been an incredible learning experience.

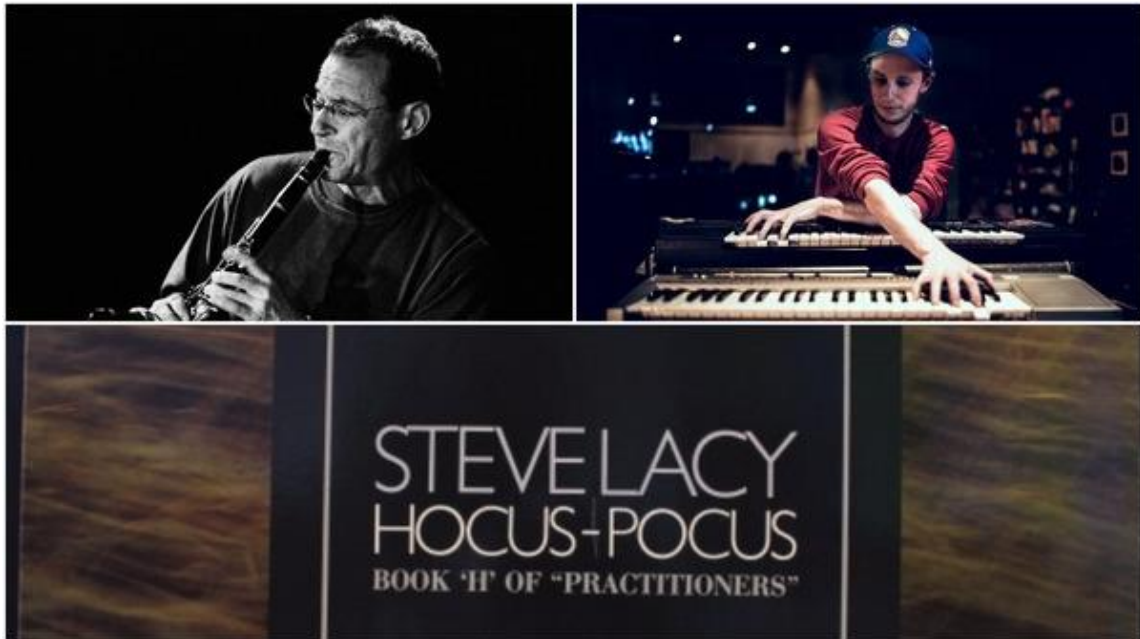
Since I started out as a musician and still work as a musician quite a bit, I think I've always approached engineering from a music-first mindset. While I'm interested in the more technical side of things, my goal with recording and mixing is to get sounds that I think are beautiful, compelling, and that complement the music. I don't think that's a particularly unique idea but I do think it makes working with me in the studio easier for some musicians. Rather than aim for "my sound" or something technically perfect, I'm much more interested in hearing what the band or artist is doing and bringing that into focus. I treat every session like I'm improvising with the band, listening and reacting and helping to shape the outcome of the music in some way.

Sometimes this means doing live processing in the studio. But sometimes it means hearing a drummer and choosing mics that I think will bring out something in their sound.

I think I've blurred the lines so much between playing and engineering that I hardly differentiate them at this point. Engineering has helped me see the bigger picture, both sonically and structurally. When I'm improvising with other musicians, I'm more aware of the timbres at play as well as the internal structure of how an improvisation might be unfolding. And when I'm writing music, I'm very conscious of the way I'd like the music to be recorded and the overall sonic picture, which in turn influences how I compose.

**SK:** *The amount of sonic focus one can get from a well-made recording is very alluring and I see why that would influence your composing. Once you've written something with the sonic picture in mind and then made the recording, do you have a regular process of deciding how to manage performing the material in concert? I know I've struggled with that, especially if it's a recording where I've overdubbed myself playing multiple instruments and don't know (or can't afford) the musicians it would take to cover all the parts in the way that I played them personally. Not to mention the much more limited way that live sounds can be mixed, or the perfectionism of getting multiple takes in the studio...*

**MC:** I really try to separate the recording from the performance, even if that means sacrificing something that seems essential about the music. When I've made solo pop/songwriting records and done a ton of studio work to create the sounds and songs that I want, I often go into the process of playing them live from the standpoint that they will be almost new pieces of music. I try to reimagine them by understanding what the core of the music is and building from that. Frankly, I think it's way more interesting to have a recording that sounds completely unique from the live performance. On the other hand, when I played in Chris Cohen's band, he wanted us to completely recreate the record live (to the extent that it's possible given the limitations of band size, etc.) I think he recorded the album with live performance in mind so it was a relatively easy thing to achieve. I don't like to write and record songs that way but I respect other people who do it.



For *Hocus Pocus*, the recording process broadened the way that Ben and I could perform the material. I started to do live processing of Ben's clarinet in concerts. We travel with his horns, my keyboard setup, and an analog processing setup that I created for the music. This means schlepping an extra amp and pedals but it's been really fun to use. We don't try to recreate parts of the recording as much as we use the record as inspiration to push ourselves into new territories. One of my favorite parts of working with Ben is that he isn't attached to almost any outcome. He's a real improviser in that sense, the journey is the music. It's a perfect match for my attitude, which is to embrace the chaos and let the electronics takeover!

*SK: Improvising with an increased focus on timbral awareness, as you put it, opens sort of a Pandora's box for someone with an interest in synthesizers. Theoretically you'll have an electric piano or a synthesizer somewhere in your collection that will be able to produce any timbre you can imagine! Which is much different from the approach of someone playing the clarinet, as Ben is on this record. I've long felt that the clarinet specifically is the band instrument with the LEAST timbral range of all: extended techniques aside, it has a very consistent sound throughout the different registers without the obvious timbral differences that bow techniques produce in the strings or mutes achieve in the brass. Different varying colors emerge from the saxophone that don't on the clarinet. I love this about the clarinet, actually. Its tone sounds somewhat electronic to me. In preparing for this recording, how did you choose the instruments you would use alongside the clarinet, and were you already imagining some of the sound processing that would take place?*

**MC:** I agree that the clarinet is one of the least flexible instruments in terms of timbre and is different from the saxophones in that overtones and false fingerings seem to yield a much narrower sonic palette. I think the sound of the clarinet blends really well with electronic instruments and Ben and I really tried to dig into that concept for this record. I'm pretty sure that Ben played only Bb clarinet and contra alto clarinet (although there might be a track that has an Alberts system Eb clarinet.) Since the contra alto has such a wide range and extends so low, we used it often as a bass instrument. And because the timbral possibilities are wider on that instrument, Ben did most of his extended technique playing on it as well. As far as my instruments, I went with some of my favorite keyboards. I love my Wurlitzer electric piano with some delay and distortion, so I knew that sound was going to make it. I also used my Yamaha YC25 combo organ because of the sustain possibilities and the ability to adjust the timbre with the drawbars while improvising. I also used my prized Casio CT 310 for some of the heavenly chordal sounds and a Korg MS 20 for single-line stuff and low end. For me, it was mostly what I was the most comfortable improvising on and also, which keyboards were long enough to accommodate the range of the etudes!



We had originally conceived of doing this material in a very dry way with just Bb clarinet and acoustic piano. We first performed the music in San Francisco in 2014 as part of a tribute to Steve Lacy hosted by ROVA. It wasn't until we decided to record the pieces that we decided to try it with different instruments. Even on the day of the recording, we thought we'd play the pieces multiple times with different combinations of instruments and just pick our favorite ones and string them together. In fact, the whole sort of collage idea for the record didn't really manifest until the engineer, Eli Crews, started to do live processing on the material as we played. He was running different instruments through his modular synth setup as well as some analog delays and pitch shifters. Once we heard that, the whole idea came into focus and we realized that the most interesting way we could present this material was as a kind of dream-like sonic collage with the different sections of the

etudes sort of ebbing and flowing and the material becoming almost secondary to the sonic landscape. In the mixing process, we also included snippets from live performances we'd done on tour, both from duo shows of the Lacy stuff and in our trio with drummer Hamir Atwal. And we also recorded solo versions of all the material which I processed later and included some of that on the record as well.

**SK:** *When recording the synthesizers on this album, were you amplifying them in the room with you or going direct and listening in the headphones? Do you have any philosophy about that, which applied to this situation?*

**MC:** I'm pretty sure that for this record I had all of my keyboards going through amps in the live room and Ben was in an isolation booth. We wanted to have a lot of flexibility in the mixing process. In general, I don't have strong feeling about one or the other, it mostly depends on the type of sound you are looking for. Synths and keyboards through guitar amps can give you that broken up, in-your-face feeling that isn't really present from a DI, as well as a sense of space from the room. But you also lose some of the clean sound and more extreme frequencies. In this case, we were looking for a warmer, fuzzier sound and I think the amps helped the keyboards blend with the clarinet.

**SK:** *"The material becoming almost secondary to the sonic landscape." That's an interesting way to describe your approach. Given that Lacy wrote the pieces as etudes (or practice pieces as the Practitioners moniker seems to reference), you may have stumbled onto quite an appropriate way to present them. Etudes are not meant to be concert works, right? They are composed and practiced so that the techniques within will be learned and assimilated into the students' playing, which in this case would mean your improvising. That sounds to me like the written parts are intentionally secondary. Although when I put it that way I feel like I'm just describing how small-group jazz works 90% of the time: there's a composed theme and structure (say, "Body & Soul") on top of which improvised statements are terraced, with the improvised and otherwise personalized flourishes being the central focus of the performance. Especially in bebop, the written melodies can be interchangeable and very etude-like ("Donna Lee" reigning king among the etude/heads!). And Muzak, shoot, that's all about landscape and nothing about material! Huh, maybe you made a Muzak record. So, is there anything about these pieces that asks you to approach them in a way other than you would approach any given source material, given your jazz background? How did you go about learning these pieces, anyway?*

**MC:** The pieces from *Book H* of "*Practitioners*" were definitely intended as practice pieces and you can see in them the building blocks for much of Steve Lacy's melodic vocabulary. In his recording of them, he plays the etudes down and then improvises. Ben and I tried this approach but had the feeling that something was lacking. Like it wasn't very interesting to hear us play this very intricate, detailed material and then use that as jumping off point for improvising. Instead, we wanted to create frameworks for the etudes that could also encapsulate an improvisational approach that dealt as much with sound and texture as it did with notes and rhythms. I think we just found something that felt right for us given our musical relationship and individual



interests. Another pair of improvisers might approach these pieces in a more traditional way or might head into even more abstract territory. I think the pieces themselves don't really offer much direction in that way, and in fact, it seems like Lacy offered very little in terms of a conceptual framework for understanding these etudes. I sort of doubt that he thought anyone would ever want to perform or record them.

Ben first sent me the record to check out. Soon after, he sent scores for the pieces. When I tried to read them it really didn't help me learn the music so I decided to transcribe all of the pieces instead and then if I got stuck, I could reference the score. Learning by ear meant that I was able to memorize the material much more quickly and I even found some discrepancies between Lacy's scores and the recordings and we ended up using my transcriptions in those cases.

***SK:** Oh, that's interesting! Did you defer to the transcription of the recording because you feel like that is a more accurate representation of what Lacy the composer-performer intended? Or did it have priority just because you're a better aural than a visual learner? I pose to our readers the question of which "recording" of a composer-player's ideas they feel is more authentic: the notes he composed on paper, or the audio recording of any particular performance he gave?*

**MC:** I think we did this mostly because the transcriptions of the recording often felt more correct and sort of fit into the structure in a more natural way. I usually deferred to Ben in these cases and it seemed like he agreed with my transcriptions.

***SK:** OK, so let's address the collage aspect of the recording. This is one area where your album inhabits a space firmly outside the jazz tradition. You could survey a hundred jazz albums and unless *Bitches Brew* is one of them, you're probably not going to have an example of a lot of creative decision-making going on in the editing and mixing stage. Collage, pastiche, and jump cuts are essential to composer-players like Anthony Braxton and John Zorn, but even they tend to compose so that those elements are played live, not created in the booth later—I feel like they're interested in reclaiming the machine process as a human process, whereas you are letting the machine process claim a stake in the artistry. Outside of jazz it's a little more common to gather up a disparate bunch of recorded material and Lego-build an album out of it, especially among self-producing artists who have engineering or mixing experience like yourself: cats who are perhaps a little more aware of the possibilities of using the "studio as an instrument" or the editing phase as part of the compositional process. Care to share any examples of albums you love that were made in this way?*

**MC:** I'm not really familiar with any records that were made in this particular fashion. The combination of the material and how we decided to deal with it led us into some strange territory and I credit the mix engineer, Mark Allen-Piccolo, for doing the intense work of splicing together material from hundreds of tracks. In terms of using the studio as an instrument, a few records jump out to me. The Grateful Dead's *Anthem of The Sun* is one of my favorite examples

of this kind of thing. They took live concert recordings and mixed them with studio recordings and other live recordings of the same songs to create a weird, out of sync record with songs coming in and out of focus throughout. Another record where the editing is very important is the Beach Boys' *Smile*. The way it was put together almost has a musique concrète feel, with weird jump cuts and totally weird genre switches. In a similar vein, some of the Os Mutantes stuff feels very built in the studio. (Of course, all three of the records I just listed were made on tape so the editing was a much bigger deal!)



artwork by Molly Barker

**SK:** *As a confirmed Zappaphile, I'll chime in that the tape editing and splicing throughout his recorded work is astonishingly good. I don't know how much of it he did himself but it was a childhood obsession of his and he was a complete workaholic so I think he personally did a lot of the editing, and it's impeccable. He has a few guitar-focused albums which present mostly live material but I've compared the actual live recordings to the officially released ones and there are subtle edits like the removal of a measure or a phrase here and there and you just can't hear the splices! I would nominate a few of his albums to the "disparate collage" category, such as *We're Only In It for the Money*. Zappa also had a word for the overlaying of separately recorded materials: "xenochrony." As we are about to delve into deeper, a xenochronous presentation can sound like it was recorded all at once—or at least in an overdub situation—when in fact the original sources never had anything to do with each other.*

*So let's try to do a forensic examination of the second track on *Practitioner*, "Hallmark," because we might get lost in the weeds a little bit but we might also end up with some interesting detail about the recording's construction. I'll lay out what I hear on a close listening second by second and you can annotate with your memories and interpretations.*

**MC:** *To be honest, it's been a while since the mixing of this record and some of the sounds are totally mysterious to me. But you are a good detective and will pretty much nail it, I'm sure. Let's dive in.*

**0:00 - 0:30** *- The clarinet and keyboard are playing a written part but the unison is intentionally loose. Was it played this way or is this an example of you overlaying the two separately-recorded tracks of written material that you mentioned earlier? There's also a looping delay underneath the melody which suggests to me that you were probably playing this live and Eli was looping a bed back to you.*



**MC:** That was played live together. I think we chopped up a sound from the improvised section that precedes “Hallmark” on the album and looped it. (That preceding intro section was recorded at Ben's house well after the studio recording at Figure 8.) The written material here is section A of the etude. The A sections of these etudes are often the most fun to blow over and seem to be the most 'melodic' (less of the pure intervallic material).

*0:30 - 0:44 - A ghostly passage of a reverse effect, suspended/floating sounds, and warping. I suspect these are three separate fragments of post-processing, which would be very selective editing given how brief each of them is!*

*0:42 - 0:51 - The processing is evolving fast and furious. Sounds like Wurlitzer and clarinet possibly playing more of the written material but it's getting hidden by a tremolo kind of chopping effect.*

*0:52 - 1:10 - A heavily effected clarinet (ring modulator?) lasts for a bit longer than the previous bursts and gives us something to hold on to.*

*1:02 - In fades an unpitched insectoid sound, out fades the clarinet.*

**MC:** Honestly, not totally sure where these sounds are coming from. Most likely, they were chopped from Eli's processing although we did more analog processing in the mixing process with Mark so it could be that. We were thinking thematically, so these sounds are meant to welcome the listener on the journey as a kind of sonic introduction. Sort of introducing the listener to some of the sounds they will encounter on the trip.

*1:16 - A new clarinet enters with more written-sounding material.*

**MC:** This is the C section.

*1:26 - A downward gliss makes for a third layer added to the insect and the delay-processed clarinet. The gliss primes us for a change of some kind; it's a very musical gesture. But where did it come from? There are ostensibly only two of you. ;)*

**MC:** This is the F section.

*1:33 - Here's that anticipated change: back to just clarinet and delay effect.*

*1:49 - Crossfade to an organ solo. This must be that Yamaha organ with the drawbars and the solo lasts > 1 minute, which is the longest single block of material in the song (at least, the longest that doesn't have anything else added to it). There's a stereo effect around 2:53 that sets up the next transition.*

**MC:** The organ solo is spinning off of the F section.

*2:58 - 3:54 - A new block of unison written material (now on the contra alto clarinet). At 3:54 a loop begins that seems to be generated from this material and lasts until 4:45.*

**MC:** This is the B section...

**3:08 - 3:30** - Layer in a spacey synthesizer and more processed clarinet.

**MC:** ...with Ben soloing over it. Through the Eventide 949 with Eli turning the knobs.

**3:28** - Crossfade THAT with another occurrence of repeated (I imagine written) material until 3:54 when the above-mentioned loop comes to the fore.

**4:04 - 5:01** - A new layer begins with an unpitched synthesizer sound and what sounds like percussion, so I'm going to guess this is an excerpted live recording of the trio with Hamir. The percussion sounds are super dirty, though, and the contra alto clarinet is honking away in the lower register into a clean-sounding channel. So, what's the deal?

**MC:** This is processed prepared piano sounds. Probably from the same material that follows, unprocessed.

**5:01** - After numerous crossfades and indiscernible studio layering, a hard edit follows here. That contrast is nice. Thus begins the prepared piano solo that lasts for the rest of the piece. What was this excerpted from? Did you know you were playing "Hallmark" when you did it?

**MC:** I was improvising on the piano with "Hallmark" in mind.

**5:36 - End** - More repeated written material enters on top of the piano track: clarinet and Casio? The keyboard has some delay added to the final phrase, which is consistent with the earlier use of effects being added to signal transitions.

**MC:** The B Section again. We had actually written out changes to this part and planned to improvise over them but decided this was nicer. The changes had a sort of Monk Rhythm Changes vibe, but felt too clunky for this record.

**SK:** A couple of general questions tumble out of this exercise. Does all of the written material for "Hallmark" appear in this recording and, if it does, does it appear in the order that the composer suggested?

**MC:** Not all of the written material appears in each piece. In "Hallmark," it seems like we left out three of the sections. This was the one piece that Ben and I almost left off the record because we found the written material the least fun to play. I think we chose the three sections that we could relate to and used those!



**SK:** *Digital editing software creates colorful blocks to represent recorded tracks and when viewed from a zoomed-out perspective they can all be seen at once, unlike listening to the piece, which will take 6 minutes or however long to do. The mixer/editor can perceive a sort of temporal balance visually: a long organ solo over here, some short blips of clarinet there. It's productive to drag these blocks around on top of and next to one another and listen to the results, which can be quite favorable in spite of their "xenochronous" nature. How much of this recording would you say was created by dragging blocks around and finding what worked, and how much was determined by listening through all the raw material you had and envisioning how one specific snippet could transition to another specific snippet? I certainly don't value one process over the other philosophically—although I bet there are those who do—and I think I hear both at work!*

**MC:** As far as how we edited, I think it was a combo of using the visual component and some kind of more abstract idea of shape/sound and listening. Since there was so much material and so much editing, there were times when we were like, "Grab that chunk from the C section and drop it on the E section, what's that like??" And other times where I think we had an idea of how we wanted the piece to flow and it was a matter of finding the correct sounds from our big pile and placing them correctly. The deeper we got in the editing process, the easier it became to imagine something that flowed. And once we got that picture in our ears, it was much clearer to see how the various pieces could fit together.



**SK:** *I love how music seems to dictate its own rules sometimes. Of course there are scientific and culturally reinforced reasons why V-I cadences sound “correct,” but in virgin creative territory like that of Practitioner, why is it that some sounds sound more “correct” than others?!*

*You pointed out that the opening track on the record was recorded at Ben’s house long after the studio session for the album. I can hear that casual, close-friends house session vibe a bit there, but I really go for the back-porch vibe of the album’s closing track, “Hocus Pocus,” which is essentially untouched by the mix and editing techniques that color the rest of the album. Recorded music always exists on a spectrum of Man<————>Machine, right? Practitioner covers an awfully wide band of that spectrum. Ending it firmly on the “Man” side exposes your jug-band roots, aha! To hell with 10th grade MIDI class; take it to the porch! (I kid, I kid.)*

*You also shared with me a solo piano performance you gave of “Hallmark” and it contains a passage where your left and right hands are playing separate layers that sound just like the kind of xenochronous material we’ve been talking about creating via studio editing. It really illustrates the incorporation of production techniques into your playing and playing techniques into your productions.*

*Alright, before we go, what is your preferred spelling of the short form of the word “microphone?” I used to insist on using mic, even though it looks a little weird and is especially awkward in the form “micing.” I thought, “microphone has a ‘c,’ not a ‘k,’ I gotta go with the ‘c’ even though the ‘k’ is phonetically stronger.” But when I realized that I abhor shortening “kombucha” to “buch”—opting for the phonetically stronger “booch”—I relaxed my stance on “mike.” It’s not capitalized, it’s not likely to be mistaken for someone’s name. Who cares if microphone doesn’t have a ‘k’ in it. But you’ve probably been called*

*“Mike” more than a few times in your life and I wanna know if you have strong feelings about this!*

**MC:** Good question! I often use mic but “micing” is horrifying and should never be written. So I use “miking” instead although I’m not sure that I really like that either. So in the end, it’s a lose/lose situation and we should probably just write “microphoning.”

**SK:** *That’s at least as good a coinage as “recordedness.”*

***Mixing engineer Mark Allen-Piccolo had the following to add about his experience working with Michael:***

Working on this record with Michael and Ben and watching their process was inspiring to me. There were hours of music. I was helping splice various sections and smooth the transitions, according to their vision for the record. It was kind of like making a collage with various pieces of found art (found art that they created!). Sometimes they had a plan on how things would develop and other times they were composing on the spot using the studio and editing as a compositional tool. I appreciated how they were able to strip away various elements of what they recorded and find some beautiful motif lurking behind the curtains. Maybe they would strip away the clarinet and keys and just use Eli’s Prime Time. They were able to identify the smallest sounds, textures, movements and say “ooh, what is that. That’s really nice. Let’s mark that and maybe we can use it for something later.” It could be the smallest thing, like 3 seconds of an aux send that just made an interesting sonic texture. Then as we were piecing all these different sections of music together, we’d return to that one interesting bit and find a way to elongate it into something new. I really appreciated that ability they had to hear the smallest little musical idea, and have the foresight to know it was something special.

One other note about working with Michael, I remember working on our indie pop album together and how one of his goals for the album was to have entirely different keyboard sounds on every song—to never use the same timbre on the album. Every timbre had to be a departure in its own right. He was also inspired to play like Garth Hudson from the Band in the way that any musical line, hook, was never repeated in the same way twice. I think in the *Practitioner* record I see these elements of Michael. Sonically courageous and free.

*[Michael](#), [Ben](#), [Eli](#), and [Mark](#) all have places for their music to be found, listened to, and purchased online.*