

The following interview with Michael Gira took place in 2023 over zoom and was conducted by Jenny Nono. Gira is the founding member, guitarist, and singer of the band Swans since 1981. Last year the band released their sixteenth studio album *The Beggar*.

Thank you so much for joining. How are you doing?

I'm on tour right now in Madrid. I'm exhausted as always, but it's going well. This is our first leg of the tour that's going to last about a year.

How are you feeling about that?

Well you know during the pandemic I was increasingly pessimistic about touring but I was simultaneously unaccustomed, psychically, to not being able to perform music. But when we came out on tour I found my legs again and it felt right. It's what I was made to do. It's good to be there and make something meaningful happen for us and the audience.

I feel like that portion of time when we were living in some-

Limbo.

Yeah. Pretty confusing time. But I'm glad you were able to get back on your feet and do what you love doing most.

I realized I hadn't really thought about because it had been integral to my existence for so long—but I had been in this process for 40 years where I write songs and rehearse intensely for weeks and then we go in the studio and record—and that takes forever—record comes out and we go on tour shortly there after. The last 12 years we have been on tour and so we do that and collapse for a little bit and the whole process starts over. That's been the blueprint of my existence for a very long time.

I was listening to your latest album called *The Beggar*. Amazing work. I listened to it twice in its entirety. I put myself as much as I could into it so I could really get a good feel for how it spoke to me.

I'm really glad that it did in some way because once I finish an album I have no idea what it sounds like anymore to me it's just ones and zeros. So I've gone over every nano second of it so many times working on it that it's this piece of dead meat hanging on a hook in the living room.

All of those years I can see how this can feel more like work than pleasure but I have a feeling you get both.

Well I don't even know the word pleasure. It's just who I am. I'm an artist. That's what I do. I don't feel like I properly exist unless I'm doing that. It's how I'm wired. It's grandiose.

It's been approximately five years since your last album. I was really curious to see if during the era of making this last record the pandemic had any heavy effect in writing on this record.

My first instinct is to say no but I presume it had some effect. I had a lot more time to sit and write which might explain the plethora of words. But as far as subject matter there are certainly no songs that deal directly with that. I would think that is tawdry to do and cheap. I don't have a terribly large amount of control over what I write. It's not that it flops out of me but once I start out on a thread I just follow it and make the words that way. In a way it's kind of involuntary. But

maybe in thinking about mortality, but as I get older I, of course, think about that more. Probably not as much as I should. There's no reason to be morbid, everyone dies. It's really important, at least to me, to keep it in mind. I'm kind of interested in understanding what the hell I'm doing on Earth. I know there's no explanation in any literal sense but it just makes it all the more urgent.

Have you always been this existential?

That's a very freighted word.

Oh okay. I mean thinking about what your purpose might be on this planet and why you're here?

I'm sure you're like that. Most thinking people think about that stuff. I mean if you didn't then you're just a consuming pod that buys products and then dies.

Absolutely true. So I wanted to talk a little bit about the songs. I really enjoyed listening to this album. There were two singles that were released. The first one was called "Paradise is Mine" and the second one is called "Los Angeles City of Death". Do you think Los Angeles is a no-good place? Do you like LA? And who is "he" in the story?

I'm very conflicted about it. I love it actually. In my mind the memory of it is all mixed in with the horror and dazzle that it embodies. I grew up in the south bay; a beach kid going body surfing everyday. It doesn't get more idyllic than that. Los Angeles is also a kind of festering sprawl that keeps growing outward and consuming the desert and polluting the air. It's kind of where the idea, for me, where artifice took off and became the central source of nourishment for American culture. If you look at Disneyland for instance. Benign right? It's also this simulacrum that, to me, the whole process of second hand fake reality originated in LA with movies and media and advertising. That whole artifice is intertwined with my picture of Los Angeles. The parts of it I love, the rolling brown hills and temperate climate are all gone. I'm a bit nostalgic about it. I sat down and was just dreaming about LA because I have this secret desire to move back there. If I had a spare million dollars I'd buy a house on the beach. But I don't, so I'll never live there

again. That's the only place I would live, Redondo Beach, Hermosa Beach. But I picture the other sides of LA as well: the disasters, the looming earthquake, and the cancerous sun beating down on everyone. All of that is wrapped up in my picture of LA.

Well put. You gave me the perfect visual.

Many childhood memories. I started, unfortunately—I don't recommend this—taking hard drugs at 12. By 13 I was on acid all the time. I was at this Inn and there were all the hippies sitting around. I was really peaking on acid. These bikers from a very famous biker gang entered—I won't mention them because I will never speak ill of them. Some idiotic late teenage hippie went up and started touching one of their bikes and they stomped him. The thing I remember the most was the sound of their boots hitting his body and skull. This thump. So that intertwined with my memory of Los Angeles as well. And also listening to The Doors first couple of albums and the kind of apocalypse they implied in certain sections. It's all intertwined in this romantic notion I have of LA. A place of riots, fire, poisonous smog, choked freeways, and disaster. I don't mean to be disrespectful to LA. This is my own fantasy reflection. I lived in the lower east side of New York. Blown up cars everywhere, abandoned buildings everywhere. Quite a desolate place. But it also held a lot of possibility creatively for a lot of artists that lived there so there's good things about it.

I think some of my favorite music came out of New York in that era.

There's two movies; *Escape from New York* and *Taxi Driver*. Those two movies made me want to move to New York. Just something about them.

When you moved to New York were you immediately like “I belong here”?

I always had this kind of naive quality about me where I would just go anywhere and figure things would be alright. That comes from being a teenage runaway and figuring out how to survive on my own and not really being intimidated by having no money and being in a strange place. But I don't know if I ever felt I particularly belonged in New York. I just made my way there and made music and art at the time too but eventually settled on music. I acclimated I guess to the environment I was in.

You mentioned that your mom wasn't around.

God bless her but she was an absolutely spectacular alcoholic. Really decrepit. Did nothing but drink and rant against my father and the world. From the time of about 11, I didn't have any parental supervision. I just figured out things for myself.

Not fun.

Yeah, it was not good. But I just figured out how to live and develop my mind on my own.

Well I think you've done an amazing job so far.

(Laughs)

Maybe you just needed to go out and do your thing on your own.

You know I have kids similar to the age I just described. It frightens me beyond description that they would encounter the type of things I did. Despite both of my parent's neglect, they must've been beside themselves in agony wondering where I was and why I ran away and disappeared.

But somehow you made it work. I remember reading about how you were in Israel. You were put in jail for selling hashish, and correct me if i'm wrong, your father found out about it and he was like “you can leave him in there for a couple more weeks”—or something like that.

No, that was a different incident in Amsterdam with a bunch of other hippies sleeping in an abandoned building and they took us to jail and through interpol my father had found me and he told them in Amsterdam to just leave me there for a week or something and it was going to teach me a lesson. And lots of other things happened that's too much to describe. I ended up a runaway in Israel as well where I stayed, ten months to a year. I was arrested in Jerusalem in possession of a couple of bricks of hashish and I was trying to sell them in this youth hostel and then the police walked in and arrested me. I think it was like two and a half months of jail there. They just forgot about me. I didn't have any advocates. And then other hippies would come and go from my cell. And finally one of them who was let out contacted a lawyer on my behalf and he got me out. Then I spent a while on the street and went to trial, then I went back to jail after being sentenced for another couple of months, then I went to a prison. It was supposed to be a juvenile prison of course because I think I was sixteen by then but they sent me to an adult prison which was harrowing. Fortunately in the section where I was there were a lot of American hippies who largely succeeded in protecting me. Then I got out of there and I was working in a copper mine in a place called Eilat, Israel which is on the Sea of Aqaba.

Wait, you were working in a mine?

Yeah.

Oh wow... That's wild.

Five dollars a day, twelve hours a day, two meals. I was living on the beach but I ended up staying with this older guy and his wife and mother in law. His mother in law was this wonderful woman. She was a Persian Jew who had escaped when Persia was Iran. She had left Iran. She was very sophisticated and a wonderful woman. She took an interest in me and she surreptitiously contacted my father somehow. He found out I was there and a plane ticket

arrived and I went back to Germany and then he shipped me back to California. He couldn't take me.

Wow. That is quite a story. You were a wild child.

And ill-advised in every way. But that's what happened. You know lots of people had much harder lives so it's nothing to weep about. But it gave me some different perspectives on living than I would've otherwise encountered.

It also just sounds like you were just a curious child, or teen.

I don't know how curious I was. I did start reading while I was in jail which was the best thing that ever happened to me. They had a fairly copious library. The other hippies would leave books there so I read a lot of books while I was there.

So I wanted to sort of go back into *The Beggar*. There's a couple more songs that I absolutely loved. One of them I wasn't sure just based on how long it was but when I listened to it twice over I was like "oh my god". I think it put me in a weird trance which I definitely appreciated. First I wanted to mention this song "Uniforming"...

It's not "Uniforming" it's "Unforming".

Oh sorry! I wrote "Uniforming". (Laughs)

It's not a proper word but it's called "Unforming".

This definitely was a song that spoke to me. I thought it was gorgeous. It was easily my second favorite song in the album. Kind of different from the rest in my opinion. I guess there seemed to be less hopelessness in this track. Comparing it to the others it's almost like you've been enlightened in some way.

I don't know about that. That would be a strange thing for me to claim.

Absolutely. I understand what you're saying. But the wisdom you've collected seems like it's there for you.

All I have is questions. But the most important line in that song to me is the idea of two parallels crossing which is obviously impossible. But to me, sometimes I think about language that way and just think about an image like that: two parallels in my mind bleeding off infinitely and how can I, through my mind, make them cross and that's impossible but the tension, or the friction, that's created in the thought when thinking about that is what attracts me to it so much. It's like if you think about zen poems they're very much like that. They're these impossible little word knots that are meant to kind of shock you out of your ordinary perceptions of reality. That's what interests me about that song.

I did study Eastern Religion and I wasn't like "Oh yes Michael has been enlightened I can tell by this song". (Laughs)

That would be a contradiction in terms to claim that you're enlightened. I'm drawn to Zen Buddhism in particular. I haven't meditated in a long time unfortunately but I think along those lines and I read books about it—that doesn't qualify. I mean, the most important thing in Zen is to meditate but I am attracted to that way of looking at consciousness and reality.

Yeah I think Zen Buddhism is probably one of my favorites.

It's the least adorned with hocus pocus. All the demons and deities and all that stuff is like—say Tibetan Buddhism for instance—it just kind of puts me off. I mean, there's nothing wrong with Tibetan Buddhism of course, but I'm more interested in the cold hard nature of how Zen is practiced.

It definitely feels like it's more focused on what's around you than what you can't see.

Well what interests me is the idea of peeling away the layers of your presumed thought process and your identity and finding out what's there, actually. Once you start to peel away your presumptions about your mind and your existence, things become a little clearer.

That sounds so hard to do.

A Zen Buddhist would say it's not only hard to do, it's the most important thing there is. (laughs)

It's really nice to have something to look at. Even Tibetan Buddhism, any kind of Buddhism it's hard for me to think of as an actual religion.

Well the word "god" is never mentioned.

It seems more like a way of life that's not trying to scare you into maybe conforming in a certain way.

A lot of aspects of religion are societal control but there's usually a core of spiritual yearning which I find to be very admirable. There's a couple songs that I wrote on an album called *The Glowing Man*. One is "Cloud of Unknowing" and one is "Cloud of Forgetting". There's a book written by a Christian Mystic, in I believe the 1400s in England. He tried to reach a way to God and a lot of people have drawn the parallels in that book and buddhism. And Saint John the Divine also wrote poems after a period of horrible confinement and persecution for his Christianity; for his *version* of Christianity. He wrote something that's been published as *Dark Night of the Soul* and that's also this beautiful yearning poem towards shedding the baggage of self and reaching some kind of union with the divine and I find that to be wonderful.

So "The Beggar Lover", on the second disc. It's a 43 minute and 51 second song. I described it as a fever dream. It definitely sounds like it has all these stories pieced together but I wasn't sure if this was a song that you had worked on in one sitting or if this was pieced together.

It's not a linear narrative. I did an album immediately following the dissolution of Swans in '96/'97 called *the Body Lovers*. The way of making that was similar to parts of the album *Soundtracks for the Blind* by Swans and that is taking preexistent material and interacting with it in the present and combining it in unexpected ways to make a long film soundtrack-like experience. So what I did with "The Beggar Lover" is I took elements of several of the last recent Swans albums and took them and re-purposed them and then re-recorded over those

and mixed them in with newer things and I guess you could say it's a collage but I don't really like that word because it sounds so passive. And then piece together all these elements. I probably had, I don't know, a couple hundred different sound sources and I just gradually fought my way through them and forged the skeleton of this piece. Once that was done then I started placing in the field recordings, things I recorded at home of my then two year old son and I asked my wife to read a story and I did some more little narrations and recorded sounds around the house and different things. And then I mixed all of those in. Then I tried to create this trajectory that had dynamics and oppositions and would pull you into it in different ways. That's how that was made.

You know for a long time even when I started Swans I looked at music as, because I had zero musical skills and I don't have a tremendous amount now but I do have a sensibility, and I looked at music as sound, as sound arranged—arranged sound or noise if you want to call it that. I never liked that word. So there's one avenue I could travel which is like with this piece “The Beggar Lover” and there's other things. I can play a song on my guitar and then arrange it but it's all sound and dynamics of course.

I can see where you're getting with a movie soundtrack type of vibe. I definitely felt that when I was listening to this because it did take me on a journey which I know sounds really cheesy.

I mean I used to say it myself and it is cheesy. For a long long time I've looked at records that way and it's only because that's how I experienced some of the formative records that I've listened to as a kid. It's like this total experience and that's what I look for, you know. I don't want to create happening tunes, I want to make an experience for people. That's what I aim for.

Well you did an amazing job with this album. I do have one more question relating to the album and it's the artwork. It's a very beautiful but very simple drawing of a heart. And a stark white background. I was curious as to who the artist was and what was the inspiration behind this and why did you guys choose it for the cover?

Well first of all you're looking at a digital image. The drawing is by Nicole Boitos and she's done work for me for many years so she did the first cover for the piece called “The Body Lovers” and

she studied art of course and she has a great facility. She's a great draftsman. She can really draw well. She worked as a medical illustrator for quite some time. I guess in the medical world an illustration is sometimes more useful than a photograph so she did medical illustrations for quite some time and I knew that about her and I thought of the artwork. I'm always looking for an icon, a central, kind of, icon for the artwork that both draws you in and pushes you away at the same time. So for some reason, I started thinking about the various organs in the body and I had her do, for the LP and the CD, four images, actually, not just the heart. I had her do a heart, lungs, prostate, and liver and those are the four images that appear in the actual artwork of the physical version of the album.

I really loved the actual drawing. You can tell she is very detailed.

And my main thing [jis] I didn't want it to be morose because I did these organs. It could be some throwing-some-gross-thing-in-your-face-idea but I wanted it to be more graphic and dry and not be grotesque in any way.

Is there a specific reason why you chose a prostate?

(Laughs)

Well, yes. Let's put it this way, I was thinking about the organs that were important to me.

(Both laugh)

Okay got it. So I wanted to ask you what it was like being in the thick of a very important era of music when punk just started to happen and you had this magazine (No Magazine) and this band.

When it happened it was to me a big “yes, this is what makes sense”. Mainly because it was like a spit in the face of consumer society and I was obsessed with consumer society with the way, at least, I felt our minds were being colonized by advertising images and identities formed by the need to consume. Sexuality changed to be leashed to consuming products and all of that, to me, was frightening and scary. It was like sort of a psychic cultural apocalypse and, to me, punk was talking about all of that as well and saying “no”. I latched onto that. But stylistically, musically, I don't think a lot of the punk rock was that great but it wasn't about that it was just about the raw expression. When No New York happened, the music in New York at the time, it was much more brutal and primitive and not leashed to the four chord idea and I thought “this is really great”. Then I moved to New York at a certain point and then started a band. I don't know about being part of the scene. I can't recall any great friends I had that were a part of the scene. I was a very negative and isolated person with no personal life so I didn't like going to parties and hanging out but I did go to all the shows and I saw all those bands and some of them affected me more than others. There was a great band that's sort of underrepresented called “The Screamers”.

Oh my god I love the Screamers.

On record they're not great now but live they were fantastic. They were, to me, the apex of the LA scene. They were just fantastic. I was a big fan. I went to all their shows. They wouldn't play as often as the other people. I saw X I don't know how many times. X, The Germs, all that stuff.

Were you a big fan of X?

Yeah. It was a great vibe. I didn't really like their records to be honest.

I do love the Screamers though. They're definitely one of my favorites so hearing you say that I'm like “Yes!”

I was a big fan. I remember meeting...

Tomata?

Yeah! Tomata! Similar to how I met Alan Vega. It was...

Life changing?

Well I don't know about life changing. Definitely a figure I thought was fantastic.

Oh god he's so cool. Did you ever get to play with them?

No.

But you got to see Suicide?

[When] I saw Suicide for the first time, there was this one place that they played and they were on ground level. No stage. There were maybe a hundred punks. I was just enthralled. The punks that were there were really closed minded because LA punks were about style and

conformity more than anything. They were spitting right in his face and yelling at him and stuff. He just kind of grabbed the spit and said “thank you thank you!”

(Laughs) That was one of my favorite stories I think. I do have a question about your older band Little Cripples before Swans. I was so curious as to what you guys sounded like..

I have no idea to be honest. I can't tell you. I mean it probably had a lot to do with punk. I didn't play any guitar or bass or anything then.

But I wanted to ask if you had any recordings.

No. Nothing that I know of.

Wow. I would love to hear what you sounded like. Maybe someone somewhere has some audio clippings and will share it eventually on YouTube. I wanted to ask you one more question before you go. I did want to ask you about the industrial influence in “Time is Money”.

As far as the industrial music I never did care about that as a genre or anything. I did admire and like Throbbing Gristle and Psychic TV a great deal. They're approach to sound I liked. It's mainly because I thought Genesis was a genius. Just his whole approach to imagination and art in life. I had tremendous amount of admiration for him. But as far as that song, the way that came into being was we got signed—thank god—to this label called Some Bizarre Records in England and gave us some money to record. One of the things they wanted was a dance single. I thought “jeez I've never danced in my life”. Never got into disco. Never gone to a dance club. I don't know anything about it. But I was working in construction and I had a nail gun and I liked the sound it made and I would shoot it into a wall to the metal studs and it made this really great sound. So we were in the studio recording these albums—money-dollar-sign albums that we made then. So they wanted a single and I thought “Well, shit”. So I took the nail gun to the studio and they recorded it and then through very primitive sampling technology he was able to record it and put it into a delay device that then you could trigger with a sequencer. We were able to make this drum track with the nail gun. It's a great snare sound. There were hundreds of edits, physical little edits to make this piece. We were listening to it. We were very excited and we finished. I think I hit rewind or play or fast forward and all the tape just spewed out of the reel all on the ground in this big spaghetti pile. Then the engineer and I had to spend another 6 hours slowly spinning it back on the reel.

(Both laugh)

I did one more called “The Screw ” and I never really went that way again. I think we did one sort of dancey thing later but I think it's actually inauthentic for me to have done it, although I think it's okay. It's not really my genre. But I just did it.

https://open.spotify.com/playlist/56iu331GP1xE2dyhVQmiBf?si=7vReB5bYRyiEDV9pIFcnjA&pi=u-msjKU_t_mTZem

Special thanks to Vinny Luciani for transcribing the interview. Swans Mix curated by Sue Jackson

Tracklist:

1. Stay Here
2. Screen Shot
3. Helpless Child
4. Mother_Father
5. Unforming
6. Love Will Save You
7. The Glowing Man
8. Kirsten Supine
9. Volcano
10. Blind