

# JAN Q&A: Michael Leonhart, Part II

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By Editor July 15, 2018

## Michael Leonhart Q&A for JAN

By David R. Adler

Inspired by the massive swarms of Painted Lady butterflies making their annual migrations across the globe, *The Painted Lady Suite (Sunnyside)* marks the recording debut of the 15-piece **Michael Leonhart Orchestra**, perhaps the most ambitious project to date from the multitalented trumpeter and composer **Michael Leonhart**. Bringing together the many facets of his musicianship, **Mr. Leonhart** offers a statement rich in mystery, textural depth and risk-taking spirit, leading an unorthodox large ensemble with key soloists including Donny McCaslin and Sam Sadigursky on tenor saxophones, Nels Cline on guitar, Pauline Kim on viola, Ray Mason on trombone and Dave Guy and **Mr. Leonhart** himself on trumpets.

Since his 1995 debut *Aardvark Poses*, **Mr. Leonhart** has pursued an expansive and unclassifiable vision as a bandleader. As trumpeter and arranger for Steely Dan, **Mr. Leonhart** has also blazed a trail in pop and rock, winning four Grammys with the band for their 2000 comeback album *Two Against Nature*. He is the son of renowned bassist Jay Leonhart; his mother Donna, wife Jamie and sister Carolyn are all gifted vocalists (Carolyn is a longtime member of Steely Dan as well).

**Mr. Leonhart** was featured on the 2016 Grammy-winning hit song “Uptown Funk” by Bruno Mars and Mark Ronson. He’s worked with everyone from Randy Newman to Alicia Keys. A sought-after producer as well, he landed a Grammy nomination for his work on the album *Many a New Day: Karrin Allyson Sings Rodgers and Hammerstein*. **Mr. Leonhart** has also distinguished himself in the art of film scoring: on the Decca soundtrack album *Songs of Labore*, he had the opportunity to conduct the great Meryl Streep in an inspired spoken-word performance.

*The Painted Lady Suite* follows in the wake of **Mr. Leonhart**’s collaboration with Nels Cline on the 2016 Blue Note album *Lovers*. In mid-June, we sat down to talk about his work.

## Part II

**Jazz Artistry Now:** About the centrality of the groove that you mentioned earlier: you’ve got four percussionists on *The Painted Lady Suite* and it sounds like you’ve given a lot of thought to your approach to percussion. There are some movements where you’ve got no bass player, but there’s still all this layered rhythm.

**Michael Leonhart:** I’ve collected percussion instruments and weird things for 25 years now and I’m always keeping an open mind. I played on [vocalist] Camille Bertault’s album *Pas De Géant* and Jeff Ballard had all these Gnawa instruments from Morocco that don’t have as many overtones as a djembe for instance, so you’re not really going to the drum circle vibe. These beautifully crafted and skinned northern African instruments — there’s a certain sound, and each region has a different color. It’s just endlessly fascinating.

On this album I have Mauro Durante, who’s very familiar with North African music. I have Mauro Refosco from Brazil, who’s played with David Byrne and has this crazy collection. I went over to his place and my direction was I wanted to have things where I’ll close my eyes, you’ll grab something and when you strike it or shake it, I won’t know what it is. I want sounds that are almost alien. So if it’s some sort of tambourine and the ear can discern that, just forget it, put it down. If it’s a Brazilian *surdo* and I’m going to know that, put it away. Let’s find things that are more abstract. That way it can almost be sound design, where we’re working with a new palette.

Similarly I had Daniel Freedman, who has traveled a lot and is fascinated with all this different percussion. And Leon Michaels had these things the electric congas, which sound just sick through spring reverb, such an incredible sound. Once I had a place held for the sounds that we found, then it was a matter of the architecture, the counterpoint of the rhythms.

**JAN:** Can you also talk about your use of the choir? It’s such an interesting effect, this four-voice choir that creeps into the mix here and there. And the choir is made up of you, your sister, your wife and even your young son. How did you conceive of that?

**ML:** Well, the spiritual jazz of the late ’60s — and here we are 50 years later and we’re kind of in the same crisis. I think of Abbey Lincoln, Sun Ra which was more abstract — what was going on in that era with civil rights and spiritual jazz. It just takes you to another place, these wordless choirs. I’ve had notepads written down to do a whole album of just choir music and a spiritual jazz album, so this was just a little hint of that. And the cherry on top of having my son on one of the melodies. A child’s voice adds another thing.

I have a book of Morricone interviews and there’s a page that I copied and carried around with me, about the nine or 10 ways he’s used the human voice in his composing, the different sounds. Guttural sounds, throat voice, sounds made with the mouth open, different vowels, cries, screams, ecstasy, joy, pain. Also, Alessandrini, who did all of that music with voice in ’60s and ’70s Italian cinema.

**JAN:** Throughout your career you’ve asserted yourself as a multi-instrumentalist, not just a trumpeter, and on *Painted Lady* you’re credited on quite a few instruments, including organ, accordion, French horn, mellophonium and bass trumpet, among others.

**ML:** It could’ve been more. I tried to keep it to a minimum. *[Laughs]*

**JAN:** Your use of all these secondary instruments gives your music an almost experimental quality.

**ML:** Like Harry Partch! Yeah, I never thought of it consciously, but I grew up in a musical household where there was tons of stuff around. I would take breaks from practicing trumpet to play piano for long periods. I’ve always been able to look at an instrument, suss out the schematics, how a sound is generated, and make some sort of sound fairly quickly. The question of proper technique is a whole other thing. I’m not some prodigy who can sit down and play anything, but I can find a way to make it vibrate. It’s understanding my limits on each instrument, more like a painter learning to grab different colors. I do have the desire to do a piano trio album, but I don’t identify as a multi-instrumentalist who can play everything at the same level.

It’s very freeing to have a sitar and a tambura around, for instance, and after I’ve practiced trumpet for a really focused 30 minutes, to put the horn down and walk over and look at a sitar and think, “Ok, how am I going to play this?” It’s refreshing, and that perspective carries over when I go back to the trumpet.

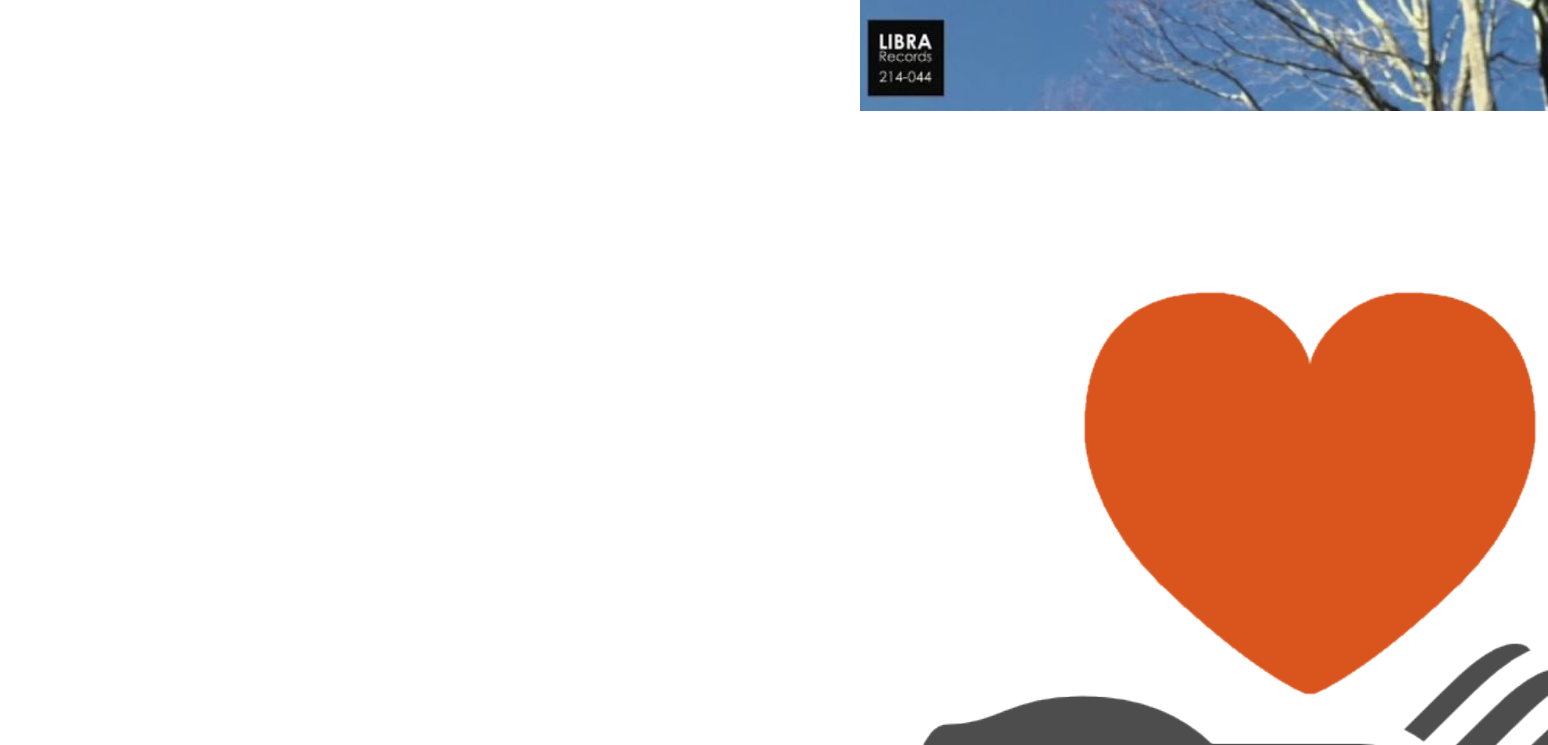
**JAN:** Finally, I want to ask about your extensive work as a session player in the worlds of rock and pop, playing with all these big-name artists including Ringo Starr and Yoko Ono, Bruno Mars, Phil Collins, Q-Tip, Brian Eno, the list goes on. It seems clear that you’re doing more than just earning a paycheck there, and the experiences you’ve gathered in that realm carry over to your own work. Can you share a bit about that?

**ML:** There’s no way that playing with all these people, from Wu-Tang Clan to Bette Midler, hasn’t influenced me. Of course it has. My dad spent a large part of his career in New York as a session musician, seeing the music for the first time and playing the hell out of it. That was never a goal of mine. I just loved playing, and what I lacked in monstrous technique I could make up for in terms of reading and ability to comprehend different styles.

I started with Steely Dan when I was 22. My sister joined the same year. We went into it very humbly. Yes, I was eccentric, I was wearing blue glasses and using a wah-wah pedal, but I thought hey, if I get fired, it’s fine. I’ll have a great time. I didn’t get fired, and then I started playing with a lot of other people, and I always danced between Top 40 and pop and more abstract music. And then when I started getting into film scoring it widened the scope of it.

I try not to play music that leaves me flat because life is short. We all do it, but I’ve been very lucky in that 99 percent of what I play is exciting to me. Steely Dan, after all these years, there is not one show where I don’t have goosebumps during it. Even if it’s a set we’ve been playing for three nights, Donald [Fagen] will do something on “Josie” or “Peg,” he’ll go for something vocally that sends a shudder through me.

I realized a long time ago that it’s not even about the music you play, it’s the spirit with which you approach it. To me that breaks down the barrier between pop, rock, funk, jazz, classical, abstract, musique concrète — it’s all expression. Certain music is going to sell differently, and that’s a business thing. But I try not to see the difference between it. The musicians I surround myself with are the same way.



Photos: [www.MichaelLeonhart.com](http://www.MichaelLeonhart.com)

Go to **Part I**

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The Jazz Artistry Now **Michael Leonhart Q&A** was written and conducted by **David R. Adler**.

**Mr. Adler**’s work has appeared in JazzTimes, The Village Voice, Stereophile, The New York City Jazz Record, The Philadelphia Inquirer, Philadelphia Weekly, Down Beat, Time Out New York, City Arts, Jazziz, The New York Times, The New Republic, Slate, The Forward, The Sontheim Review, Fairmont Magazine (Canada), La Tempestad (Mexico), GEO (Germany), New Music Box, All Music Guide, Global Rhythm, Signal to Noise, Coda, Jewish Currents and more. He is happy to be a contributor to **Jazz Artistry Now**.

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Mr. Adler

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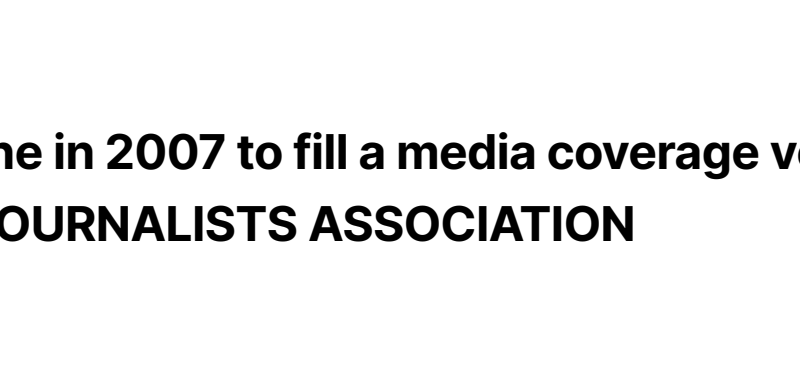
**JAN Q&A: Michael Leonhart, Part II**

**JAN Q&A: Michael Leonhart, Part I**

... has yet to make an unworthy recording



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