

"New Haven born guitarist and composer Michael Gregory Jackson has been a vital, if not often discussed, part of creative music for the better part of forty years. From his early work with reedist Oliver Lake and trumpeter Wadada Leo Smith to proto-Black Rock group Signal, to his recent work with Danish improvisers in both a "power trio" and larger ensemble formats, Jackson has a diverse and captivating discography that skirts free music, soul, and art-rock."

– Clifford Allen, Ni Kantu

"One of the most lyrical musicians working today...singularly personal and arresting and one of contemporary music's few genuine poets... Jackson's daring, darting vocal is so serene yet intense that one is hard-put naming a contemporary vocalist of similar grace and power."

– DownBeat

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"Jackson has that rare combination of virtuosity and versatility, able to play the guitar whiz...then slip easily into hugely commercial cuts. Michael Gregory (Jackson) is, quite simply, the business." – Q Magazine (England)

"For fans of Michael Gregory Jackson's...playing this is the album that they've been waiting for him to make, with the guitar thrust to the fore by the very nature of the trio format along with pieces that are excellent vehicles for the jumping off point of improvised music-making. With MGJ in such rich form let's hope there's more to come from this free jazz guitar maestro."

– Chris Haines, "Top Ten List 2017," Free Jazz Blog

"If more people checked into his world, this superb new disc [Spirit Signal Strata] and the many others before, they might still see there's so much more that can be done with...the electric guitar. If you just have the skill, passion and balls to pursue the unknown like Michael Gregory Jackson." – Sal Cataldi, Huffington Post

"Michael's renown has long been based on his brilliant technique and highly original conception as a guitarist, all of which is richly and astonishingly evident on this [Spirit Signal Strata] album's eight original compositions."

- Tom Reney, NPR Jazzbeat (New England Public Radio/NEPR.net)

"Michael Gregory Jackson has for many years been a singular force in contemporary jazz. No other artist managed to combine such lyricism with freewheeling strength. His new album [Spirit Signal Strata] shows us all that, then underscores how much we need to remember exactly how accomplished a guitarist he has always been. He comes at us with a set that gives notice."

- Grego Applegate Edwards, Gapplegate Music Blogs.

" Jackson's music dignifies whatever size canvas he chooses to explore. He is committed and believable at every juncture." - David Greenberger, re Spirit Signal Strata, The Duplex Planet

“Take Bowie’s sophistication, add Prince’s flamboyance, and mix with plenty of originality. Michael Gregory (Jackson) writes crisp, vibrant songs, and sings them like it’s a matter of life and death.”

– Trouser Press

“The songs...realize Michael Gregory Jackson's own theoretical musings about the fertile musical possibilities created when applying blues and jazz sensibilities to rock.”

– Spin

“A highly distinctive and beautiful CD of originals...his own unique style that synthesizes jazz, pop and soul...filled with romantic longing and smoldering passion.”

– Music Revue

“Michael Gregory Jackson's high tenor voice calls to mind Smokey Robinson, Sting or Ben Harper as it flows with his guitar riffs...He doesn't back away from the difficult and sometimes raw themes connected with love and loss. Lays bare the sinews of human emotion. Gregory's honesty and hypnotic sound mixes are unabashedly mellow.”

– The Advocate

“Jackson’s voice recalls vintage Prince, Curtis Mayfield and Aaron Neville...There’s little doubt that Gregory remains a stringman supreme.”

– Sunday Republican

“At a certain point Jackson comes spinning out of an emotional wringer, and takes a beautifully berserk guitar solo. The dynamics are unbeatably exhilarating.”

– Record

“While fans of soulful '70s and '80s artists (Stevie Wonder, Lionel Richie, etc.) will find easy entrance into Jackson’s music, it’s also filled with subtle surprises that acknowledge his background in the gleefully iconoclastic fringes. All is not as it appears, with layering and compositional flourishes embedded in the songs, revealing themselves in slyly gentle ways. From the graceful modulations of “If I Only Had a Minute” to the thick guitar dazzle of “Love’s Parade,” this is an album filled with rich singing, inventive playing, and alluring, mesmerizing and cliché-free hooks.”

– Metroland.Net

“Art Ensemble Syd is...established by bassist and composer Niels Praestholm and flutist Thorstein Quebec Hemmet in Denmark. The greatest scoop so far is the cooperation with poet, soul singer, guitarist and avant-garde composer Michael Gregory Jackson, who participates on the CD "Liberty" performing...his own compositions.

Freedom is the title and also a keyword concerning Michael Gregory Jackson. Neither he nor the ensemble let themselves be restrained by musical styles or conventions. Here is everything from the subtle acoustic solo hymn "For My Mother" to the polyphonic title composition "Liberty"... The ensemble can play both quiet and abstract...and with a funky physical groove. This is music that goes into both body and mind.

The listener is confronted with human tragedy in "Undercurrents", a requiem for the victims of Hurricane Katrina as well as universal existential pain in "Down" but Michael Gregory Jackson is never lost in the dark. His music is spiritual and holds the light - even in the darkness - as he sings "Come on and lift me up/ I've falling down again." the music contains a will to dive into

the deepest layers of human life, but is also a tribute to life itself. A sound painting that covers the diversity of life itself." – Jakob Baekgaard, Jazz Special (Denmark), June 2013

"Guitarist, composer, improviser and songwriter Michael Gregory (Jackson)...paved the way for the Black Rock movement in the 1980s, recording for Arista and Island and heading the power-trio Signal (with drummer Pheeroan AkLaff and bassist Jerome Harris).

Jackson's first LP as a leader was...Clarity [Bija, 1976/ ESP, 2010] Gregory is joined by regular associates...Oliver Lake, Wadada Leo Smith. And David Murray.

The opening "Clarity" ...moves through an evenly-spaced upward tone row, following along a path outlined by Smith's concept of rhythm units. The shock—at least to those solely weaned on improvised music—comes when Jackson spins out a delicate, soulful tune with a vocal delivery reminiscent of a young Stevie Wonder. It's a short sung poem that meanders along a burbling sonic brook, but its effect is extraordinary, immediate and unlike anything else before or since in improvised music.

"Oliver Lake" is a duo for guitar and curved soprano saxophone... Gregory's guitar virtuosity is readily apparent, scumbling phrases into grays and browns with the use of a volume pedal (apparently an influence on Bill Frisell)...

There is one solo guitar piece...a fantasia for 6-string and environmental reverb..."Prelueoionti," which nods at players like Leo Kottke, Sandy Bull, and John Fahey's "Approaching of the Disco Void." Americana and East European folk music are equally evident.

"Iomi" uses a very simple series of pitches altered through tempo shifts, and it's this bald-faced simplicity that often works best in Gregory's music. Even as the interpretation of that simplicity might draw out timbrally complex, acrobatic improvisations, what is at the heart of the music is something centered and direct.

These early investigations have granted a quality that Gregory's music retains; his trio Clarity-3, with drummer Kresten Osgood and bassist Niels Praestholm, fuses the melodic/rhythmic units of earlier work within a contemporary jazz-rock form. Rarely is a vision so wide-ranging encapsulated by such basic tenets as clarity."

– Clifford Allen, All About Jazz

"As a general principle, I don't write reviews of recordings, but when I received a writer's copy of Michael Gregory Jackson's new CD Liberty, [EME, 2013] performed by Jackson and Art Ensemble Syd, I thought that I might make an exception to honor such fine work that is indeed a "child of Ornette." Liberty is alternately delightful and somber, sometimes displaying both qualities at the same time. The music is deeply touching and even heart breaking. It defies category (yay!). Michael Gregory Jackson's aesthetic brings together...an eclectic array of styles,

it is hard to imagine anyone not finding something here to love. And I cannot stop listening to this recording. It is that good.

The recording opens with the infectious energy of...“Liberty part one.”...one part New Orleans early jazz, another part Ornette Coleman “harmolodic” synchronicity, and a third part jam band party.

The set concludes with...solo acoustic guitar, “For My Mother.” This melody is ornamented with virtuosic solo runs and figures.... This is a beautiful conclusion to a deeply affecting, often heart breaking and beautiful musical journey. “

– Bob Gluck (Jazz Author )

“Michael Gregory Jackson is the quintessential modern troubadour. ...

Clarity [1976/ ESP 2010] possesses some of the most exquisite music that Jackson has ever written and performed.

The extended version of "Prelueoionti" sees the guitarist leaping off into the unknown with great, galloping lines that move breathtakingly forward, gaining mass and momentum... Shaped like a mini concerto, "Prelueoionti" is a masterpiece of changing tones and colors that Jackson delivers magnificently on his sonorous acoustic guitar. Clarity (4)," is a moving exploration into the world of the guitar...joined by the saxophonists and Smith. The result is a moving, probing exposition of a song that suggests vast possibilities.

Jackson's...burnished voice glazes the lines as he announces with sharp clarity, only to soften the lines as they fade away at the end of each bar. This style of vocalizing makes his voice singular, and enhances his image like that of a black troubadour, wending his way through life as he picks up the shards of broken glass that appear in his path. Thus his ability to soften the music as he bends notes and twists phrases is often at beautiful odds with the harsh nature of his musical journey. ...the elemental beauty of these songs that he shares with Lake, Murray and Smith, is timeless.” – Raul D’Gama Rose, All About Jazz, August 12, 2010

“Michael Gregory Jackson's first recording as a leader has been reissued...and it's a vivid reminder of how melodically charged his music is from a more subtle perspective. With Jackson primarily on acoustic guitar, the memorable melody lines he stretches to full Zen-like lengths are perfectly clear, yet evoke his individualism with little doubt.

Help from tenor saxophonist David Murray, flutist and saxophonist Oliver Lake, and trumpeter Leo Smith support Jackson's agile and facile musings without...bassist or drummer, a bold move...this gorgeous set of spontaneous and composed pieces...have a breadth and depth all their own.

With Jackson as a soloist on "Prelueoionti," his cascading acoustic guitar lines tumble and glisten with the sheen of a waterfall, while the ensemble pieces (like the title track) float in time, the woodwind players giving supple...support. Later...a spiky or angular approach is heard...from Lake and Murray, but a somber mood ("Ballad") or patient improvisation ("IOMI") identifies this music more accurately.

Considering Jackson's later amplified work, Clarity is good to hear again, reminding everyone of his starting point, where flowering talent brightly bloomed.”

– Michael G. Nastos, All Music

“A new Michael Gregory Jackson album always promises to be an event. After Before is no exception. His highly original guitar wielding is given an excellent setting with...his Clarity Quartet: Niels Praestholm, bass, Simon Spang-Hanssen, tenor and soprano sax, and Matias Wolf Andreassen, drums. There is cohesion and spirited togetherness in this band. There is a funky kind of leverage to his soloing on this one, along with a scatter overall fullness.

Jackson...occupies a space in the jazz guitar world that is wholly original and extraordinarily schooled in its steady- state singularity. After Before is a new step along the way, deserving to be numbered among his very best albums, in ways that hang together as "new," very much new. Highest recommendations! – Grego Applegate Edwards, GappleGate Guitar and Bass Blog

“Avant-garde music seemed always to come in two phases over the century of Jazz history. The first phase...wild...the second...quieter and immensely more structured. ...Guitarist Michael Gregory Jackson falls into this category with a combination of vocal and instrumental works, some even reminiscent of Chet Baker. His association with both wild and immensely structured musicians like Anthony Braxton, Sam Rivers or Chico Freeman not to mention landing a job as a professor at the New England Conservatory provides ample illustration of this phenomenon.”

–Bernard Stepien, CKCU FM

”That was beautiful. ...Very beautiful, very mystical. It was very well played. I enjoyed it... I would rate it five stars.” –Sam Rivers on Michael Gregory Jackson’s A View of This Life (from Clarity, (Bija) in “Blindfold Test” by Bret Primack, DownBeat

EXCERPTS from the CODA article:

Vladimi Simosko, “Studio Rivbea: SPRING FESTIVAL,” CODA,  
July 1976

“The Scene at Sam and Bea Rivers’ Studio Rivbea, at 24 Bond Street in New York City’s East Village, has been the ultimate listening environment for the best in current jazz for some years now. Sam and Bea have converted their pad into a sounding board for creative music, where for a small entrance fee one can mill around talking with musicians and hard-core afficiandos in a generously relaxed atmosphere, the seven nights of music making up the 1976 Spring Music Festival meticulously recorded by Douglas Records, the loft platform at the front of the studio being occupied by a master control board.

The variety and quality of the groups was very impressive, virtually a review of many of the most intriguing contemporary jazz figures. The first night of the Festival, Friday May 14, the opening set featured a sextet led by the excellent drummer and percussionist Phillip Wilson, which included altoist Julius Hemphill., tenor man David Murray, Michael Jackson doing intriguing things with various guitars and bamboo flutes, Fred Hopkins on bass, and Olu Dara on trumpet. Their music was loose, free and abstract.

Saturday May 15 was...the most musically rewarding of the three evenings of the first weekend of the Festival. The Westons were followed by Oliver Lake, playing alto and curved soprano saxophones and flute, with Mike Jackson, Fred Hopkins, and Phil Wilson, for one of the great sets of the Festival, the music and musicians being first rate, together and inspired. Lake's quartet provided some of the most passionate and beautiful original music to be heard at Rivbea, and that is saying a lot.

The final night of the Festival was Leo Smith's "New Dalta Ahkri" lyrical beauty and exquisite texture.

Studio Rivbea's Spring Music Festival 1976 must stand as a historic event in presenting so many vital, current musicians together, playing for the most part what can only be identified as creative music of the mid-1970s...and if this series of recordings is released, much will have been accomplished in defining the state of the art in the mid-1970s and bringing greater exposure to both the younger musicians and the established but still underexposed pioneers of the contemporary scene."

– CODA

EXCERPTS from the Guitar Player article:

Tom Mulhern,

["Michael Gregory Jackson: A Jazz-Rock Career with an Avant-Garde Foundation,"](#)

Guitar Player, October 1980

"26 year old Michael Gregory Jackson's ..career...showed early signs of being one of strictly avant-garde creation. His work with the style's giants, such as saxophonists Oliver Lake, Roscoe Mitchell, Julius Hemphill, and Anthony Braxton, pianist Muhal Richard Abrams, and trumpeter Leo Smith, placed him among top-notch musicians and brought him to prominence.

The young guitarist ...started composing music that covered a wider range...with Signal, a rock group, and the Michael Gregory Jackson band... while his guitar playing is a prominent factor in most songs, it is blended with the sonorities of the other instruments... This homogenous approach helps establish the identity of Jackson's music; still, unmistakably at the heart of each song is his guitar.

Michael can't recall exactly when he became a professional player. "The realization that I was becoming a professional came when I met Leo Smith in New Haven in 1973. He was very direct and strong, and he was doing original material that was nowhere near the mainstream...And that's when I started to apply all my energy to getting my musical act together.'

Trios and duos consisting of Jackson and Smith (and occasional sidemen) ensued. In 1975, Michael began performing with saxophonist Oliver Lake. The pair and other musicians from AACM worked together and recorded, also saxophonist Anthony Braxton.

The guitarist also worked with other free-form and avant garde musicians, including pianist Anthony Davis and percussionist Pheeroan Ak Laff, with whom Michael formed a collective called Clarity. Michael says, "In Clarity, we performed music that was written out...improvisation, and also theater pieces."

Evolving with Jackson's music and equipment was his choice of effects. "Back when I was first playing rock, I used a Univox fuzz," he recalls. "Then I got a Schaller fuzz and a Colorsound wah-wah. And while I was with Oliver Lake, I got a Morley volume pedal, which had the power boost feature. It was good for getting a bit of an edge."

Dropping the two E strings down to D is Michael's most common returning procedure. ...he says "It opens up a whole new set of possibilities. I can get a deeper bass tone and a wider range to play with." Adding to the range of sounds is Jackson's selection of pickups. ...his amp setup is stereo. Michael constantly adjusts his harmonic balance. Jackson relies heavily on melodies for his solos. Each song is treated individually Michael says "Each tune has its own set of rules for us to abide by."

The chief goal for him is to keep the vitality high and the music accessible, while also keeping the individual elements interesting My influences are deeply rooted in composition. I'm concerned mainly with the overall texture of the song's sound. I don't think that any one instrument necessarily has to be dominant. The point is to make the music work, and to make the guitar and all the other instruments a part of it." –Guitar Player

EXCERPTS from the Rolling Stone article: Robert Palmer,  
"Michael Gregory Jackson's Future Funk," Rolling Stone

"Despite its obvious commercial potential, Jackson's second album [Heart & Center] for Arista/Novus is unlike anything that's been heard before. The rhythms, a varied lot, tend toward funk, and his songs and vocal style clearly relate to Earth Wind & Fire and Stevie Wonder. On the other hand, the melodies incorporate Stravinsky-ish interval jumps that would terrify most pop vocalists, and the shimmering backdrop of voices, guitars and synthesizers, all overdubbed by Jackson, bring to mind the orchestral voicings of the late Duke Ellington. Jackson is blending a staggering variety of influences into a coherent whole.

Jackson sat down to talk. " I grew up listening to Ellington, Stanley Turrintine, Jimmy Smith...Then I started listening to Coltrane and Pharoah Sanders, the Beatles, Cream, then into African and Balinese music, a lot of Stravinsky, a lot of Webern, Bartok, Berio, Cage.

All simultaneously. My first be-bop gig was in a jazz club in New Haven. I started experimenting with synthesizers and percussion instruments and had a group with an electric piano, a fellow who played the room and a bassoon."

Remarkably enough, Jackson made sense out of all these influences. By the time he was twenty-one he was already the most original jazz guitarist to emerge since the Sixties.”  
– Rolling Stone



# MICHAEL GREGORY JACKSON

## A Jazz-Rock Career With An Avant-Garde Foundation

By Tom Mulhern

**S**PECIALIZATION IN ONE musical style is often the key to a guitarist's success, and finding that elusive niche can lead one on a lifelong search. Some players, however, such as 26-year-old Michael Gregory Jackson, have moved away from strict specialization and broadened their bases to encompass a number of musical forms, and it is the variety of styles commanded by Northampton, Massachusetts' Jackson that has been the key to his success as a soloist, group leader, and sideman.

Michael's comparatively short career (ten years) showed early signs of being one of strictly avant-garde creation. His work with the style's giants, such as saxophonists Oliver Lake, Roscoe Mitchell, Julius Hemphill, and Anthony Braxton, pianist Muhal Richard Abrams, and trumpeter Leo Smith, placed him among top-notch musicians and brought him to prominence, although it only established him in that one field.

The young guitarist felt the need to diversify and more effectively tap his skills (having gleaned various influences from the jazz, folk, rock, and blues veins throughout his development), so he began composing music that covered a wider range. Today he works steadily throughout the northeastern U.S. with two ensembles: Signal, a rock group, and the Michael Gregory Jackson Band, which performed on his *Gifts* and *Heart & Center* albums.

The four solo albums by Jackson showcase his command of many musical styles as well as his evolution in both composition and technique. And while his guitar playing is a prominent factor in most songs, it is blended with the sonorities of the other instruments—rather than slapped on top to draw attention away from the song to the soloist. This homogeneous approach helps establish the identity of Jackson's music; still, unmistakably at the heart of each song is his guitar.

Born on August 28, 1953 in New Haven, Connecticut, Michael grew up in nearby Hamden, absorbing his father's spare-time noodling on the ukulele, mandolin, and harmonica. By the time he was seven years old, the youngster was starting his first of six guitar lessons at a local music store. With his

classical guitar in hand, he attended two sessions each week, learning the rudiments of sight-reading and ear training and performing in occasional recitals.

When he was nine, Michael received his first electric, an almost nondescript instrument except for the "three pickups and 43 knobs" that remain in his memory. In

his early teens, Jackson listened intently to

By the time he reached his teens, Michael was playing in various rock and blues bands, and he sometimes performed solo, accompanying his folksinging on acoustic guitar. His lessons ceased, but he decided to further his musical education on his own. Walter Piston's *Harmony* [W.W. Norton & Co., 500 Fifth Ave., New York, NY 10036] and several other books on orchestration served as the foundation for Michael's studies of music theory.

Through his exposure to modern classical composers such as Bartok, Stravinsky, and Webern and jazz players such as saxmen John Coltrane and Pharoah Sanders, Michael began pursuing instruments other than guitar. "There were times when I'd do massive solo concerts," Michael says. "I played synthesizers, organs, acoustic and electric guitars, as well as percussion. And I wrote all of the material. In fact, I always wrote the songs, even with rock bands; the only non-original tune was Johnny Winter's version of 'Jumpin' Jack Flash' [from *Johnny Winter Live*, Columbia, PC 30475]. From the time I was 15 until I was about 20 I played every sort of gig—even coffeehouses. At about that time I started to better understand the role of the guitar in a group context."

Michael can't recall exactly when he became a professional player; in fact, he had never given conscious thought to becoming a musician at all. He simply played, and a career evolved as a result. "Given certain realities such as the need for more money, I sometimes took other jobs, but for the most part I just played a lot of music. The realization that I was becoming a professional came when I met Leo Smith in New Haven in 1973. He was very direct and strong, and he was doing original material that was nowhere near the mainstream. I figured that I could do that, too. And that's when I started to apply all my energy to getting my musical act together.

Trios and duos consisting of Jackson and Smith (and occasional sidemen) ensued. In 1975, Michael began performing with saxophonist Oliver Lake, with whom he eventually collaborated on several albums. The pair and other musicians from the AACM (Association for the Advancement

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Jimi Hendrix, Eric Clapton and Johnny Winter, although his interest wasn't solely in rock. "Around my house, my father played lots of Wes Montgomery, Les Paul and Mary Ford, and early George Benson," he recalls. "But I also found influences in [keyboardists] Jimmy Smith and Groove Holmes as well as [saxophonist] Stanley Turrentine. I guess the Beatles were an influence in my development, but my music never reflected it. I'm also a big fan of [bluesman] Son House and Duke Ellington—they were very important factors in my style. I liked what Hendrix did with the sound of his amp, and I was later impressed with John McLaughlin's tremendous speed. But I was affected by guitarists only from a 2nd level—8 point—didn't want to emulate them."

PHOTO BY ROBERT TOLBY