VILLAGE PRESERVATION
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Oral History Interview

ROB MASON

By Sarah Dziedzic

New York, NY

May 13, 2020

Oral History Interview with Rob Mason, May 13, 2020

Narrator(s)	Robert Paul Mason
Address	
Birthyear	1946
Birthplace	-
Narrator Age	74
Interviewer	Sarah Dziedzic
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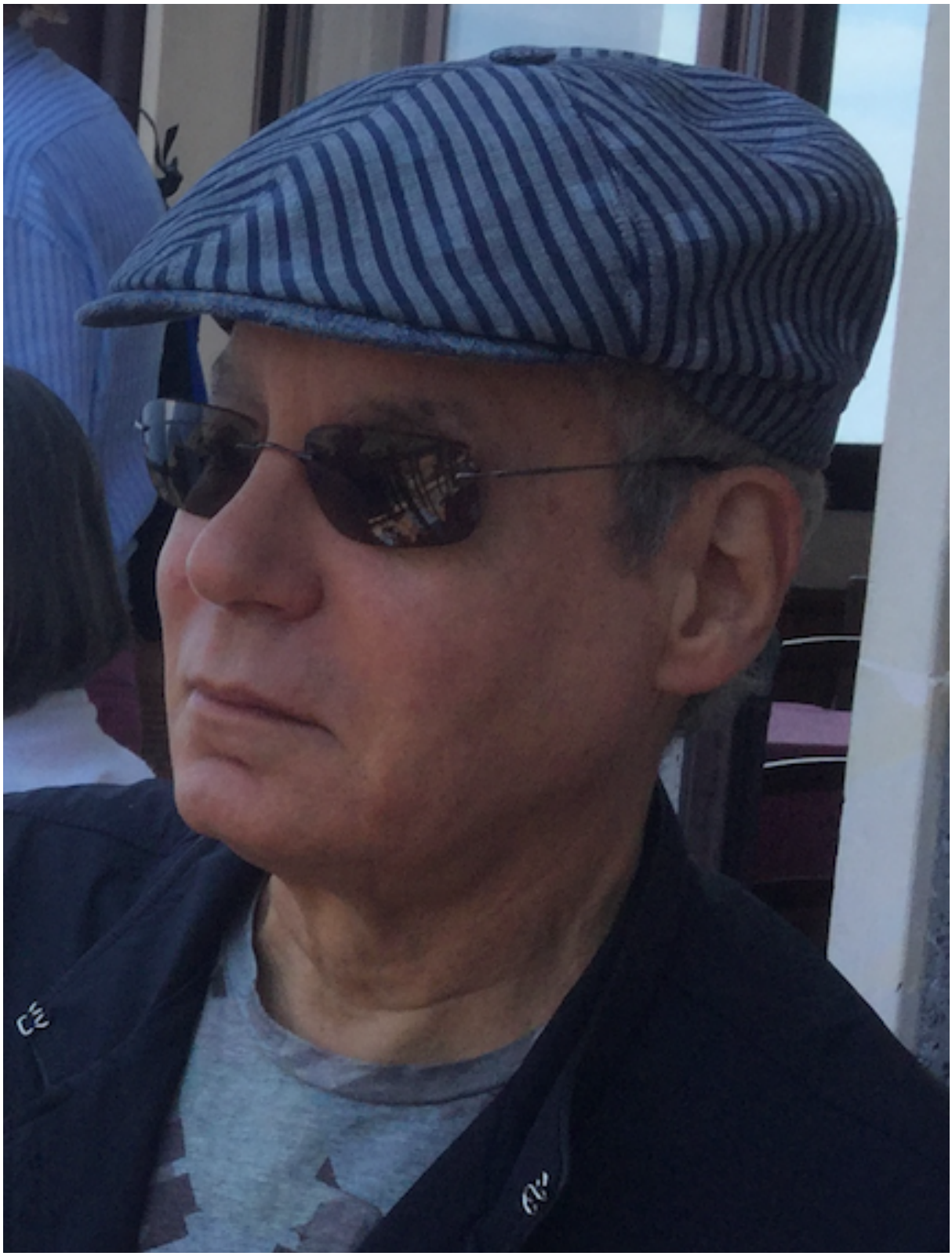

Robert Mason, 2018 (Taormina, Italy), Photo by Mary Jan Mason

Quotes from Oral History Interview with Rob Mason

Sound-bite

"My name is Robert Mason. I've been in the music and recording field since a very early age. …I was synthesizing my formal training with what I was acquiring through osmosis by being exposed to the master practitioners themselves while they were actually practicing their art. That combination was ineffable. One just absorbs it all and becomes a part of the culture and the culture becomes a part of you. It was very helpful in building an early sense of confidence that came in handy later on because I really felt like I belonged almost no matter where I was."

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Additional Quotes

"…my dad would regularly take me to the Village Vanguard, starting when I was around eight years old, for Sunday afternoon matinees. That was when I was first introduced to the live music field. As soon as I heard that live sound, I knew that it was where I wanted to spend my life. It was absolutely astonishing to me. I was eight years old, and hadn't ever heard a live jazz trio before or, for that matter, professionally-played live instruments before. Actually, it was the Junior Mance Trio…It was only a piano trio, but hearing real live drums, hearing real live bass, and real live piano, in that hallowed room in the apex of its triangular-shaped basement room, was absolutely flabbergasting to my young ears at the time. I would just sit there with Lou, the former Café Society manager, who'd gone on from there to manage the Vanguard for Max Gordon, and groove away. I became something of a Sunday afternoon regular there. Those earliest memories really made a big imprint on me, one that follows me to this very day." (Mason p. 3–4)

"I had graduated with a degree in electronic music composition, and I had built my own electronic music studio while I was attending Oberlin by necessity because I was there in the years before they had a proper electronic music studio at the school. I had to be entrepreneurial even back then, and find a way to do it myself, which I did. That's how I graduated with my bachelor's degree, by creating some of my earliest electronic work in my own home-brew studio. A couple of professors and fellow students helped me build it. It was really quite amazing and had never been done before." (Mason p. 6)

"At the same time, I built my first live-work loft in the Meatpacking District at 400 West 13th Street, right on the corner of 13th Street and Ninth Avenue (where the restaurant, Catch, is now—or was—located). I needed a space where I could work with my synthesizer, and rehearse

my music with fellow musicians, where I wasn't disturbing my neighbors. I could never do that in a normal apartment, so I started building out these commercial spaces where the rent was cheap, and you had to basically install your own utilities, plumbing, electrical, very rudimentary at first but it all functioned well. And in those days in my first loft, my next-door neighbors were Rip Torn and Geraldine Page…

…From there, I moved from one neighborhood to the next in the Village area. SoHo for a moment, Chelsea for a moment. Basically buying into lofts just so I could set up my synthesizers—which I built myself, again—and rehearse my music. Those were great days." (Mason p. 7)

"When one has an opportunity to hear people like John Coltrane live every night when they're at the peak of their powers making their first breakthroughs, and at the same time one is studying music theory and composition as an adolescent, one's brain is really wide open and is synthesizing and absorbing everything in ways that you're not completely aware of at the time…I had a chance to hear multiple masters perform over time and actually understand those experiences through the lens of the music theory and compositional techniques that I was simultaneously absorbing during my early formal training. I think that combination is the best education in the world. Nobody can teach that—one has to experience it firsthand and actually live it. So yes, that's a very good question. A lot of those formative sorts of things were going on in my mind during those years." (Mason p. 12)

"And so working with tape was the thing, along with the whole idea of the recording studio as a musical instrument: creating tape loops by using microphone stands and running the tape around the room, and then back across the playback head of the tape machine, and then perhaps playing it backwards and changing the speed to create your sonic raw material. I worked like that with the tape machines, as well using oscillators and electronic instruments, with the idea of combining the analog acoustic derived materials with the purely electronic sounds. It was just a wonderful time to be working in the field. We all thought we were part of a revolution because, the way I thought of it was: for the first time in the history of music, we were creating music as an art object, kind of like a painting or a sculpture is an art object. Of course, a recording is not a unique art object, like an original painting, but suddenly it seemed possible that a new art form was being created: music as a recording that exists as something separate from a performance. And to this day, it's a concept has become very much a part of our culture." (Mason p. 20)

"Well, that wasn't my original intention; I was creating a studio to use for my own work, but I got carried away. I always throw myself into any project that I undertake to the maximum extent I can. So, having worked in most of the seminal recording studios at the time…I would

take a little from here, and borrow a little more from there, and created my own architectural synthesis. I had a lot of wonderful help from friends, but basically, I had to do the best job I could with what I could cobble together…

…When I was finished, people came up and saw all this and immediately started wanting to record here. But I had never intended to go into such a career. At first I thought I could just fill in a little here and there, to outside clients, to pay some of the expenses. But when the word got out about the place—they talk about how opportunity knocks, you know? It was more like opportunity knocking and putting its fist right through my door. So I was off to the races before I knew it…

…I found that operating a state-of-the-art recording studio used a different set of brain cells than those one uses being a contemporary composer." (Mason p. 29)

"I created a very complex ceiling design in the studio room where most of the recording took place, where I designed a series of angled panels that created its own sound signature of reflected sound. And you can only get that sound signature in one place in the world—that room in my studio. That sound signature can be heard in a lot of recordings that were made up here. The actual studio had four isolation booths, where everybody had unobstructed sight lines so they could see one another easily while playing. I also created a similar ceiling in the control room, but also worked on the control room acoustics a lot with the professionals, which is very important. With a certain amount of trial and error (actually there were plenty of errors at the beginning that were quickly corrected), it was finally established as a classic and accurate control room. All the rooms combined together to create a classic recording environment, one that, I believe, deeply resonated with people.

But it was all about the sound. The proof of the pudding was in the eating—the sound was there. And the inspiration was there." (Mason p. 33)

Summary of Oral History Interview with Rob Mason

Robert Mason, one of the first post-genre contemporary classical electronic composers, became interested in music and composition watching live music performances in the clubs of Greenwich Village when he was a child in the 1950s and '60s. Despite his young age, and as a result of his skill and aptitude, he began attending college-level classes at the Mannes School of Music, and received private lessons from composer Edgard Varese, an originator of electronic music composition. He attended the High School of Music & Art on the City College campus, where he studied music and composition, and developed a connection with the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center. He continued to seek out live music performance as a balance to his studies.

In pursuit of a degree in electronic music composition, Mason left New York to attend Oberlin Conservatory, where he built the school's first electronic music studio, and developed one of the first—if not the very first—polyphonic synthesizers. He then returned to New York and did graduate work at the Intermedia Department of New York University, and further developed his knowledge through practice with other electronic music composers. By the early 1970s, he was performing his music at venues across the city, including small clubs in the Village, as well as the Hayden Planetarium and Radio City Music Hall, among others.

An early adopter among musicians of live-work spaces, Mason converted many industrial spaces to accommodate synthesizers and serve as rehearsal spaces for electronic composers. Mason eventually settled in a loft on 12th Street and began to create the unique live-work environment that would become RPM Studios. The recording studio he developed featured state-of-the-art elements, as well as an unparalleled collection of restored analog gear. While Mason initially intended to use the studio to compose and record his own music, he followed a series of opportunities to record with legendary producers and musicians, and ended up developing RPM Studios as a business that thrived for decades. He retired his studio business in 2004.

In this interview, he reflects on his growth as a musician and composer, shares stories of operating RPM studios, and outlines new projects with younger generations of post-genre contemporary classical electronic composers.

Compiled by Sarah Dziedzic

General Interview Notes

This is a transcription of an Oral history that was conducted by Village Preservation.

The Village Preservation Oral History Project includes a collection of interviews with individuals involved in local businesses, culture, and preservation, to gather stories, observations, and insights concerning the changing Greenwich Village. These interviews elucidate the personal resonances of the neighborhood within the biographies of key individuals, and illustrate the evolving neighborhood.

Oral history is a method of collecting memories and histories through recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of adding to the historical record.

The recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. Oral history is not intended to present the absolute or complete narrative of events. Oral history is a spoken account by the interviewee in response to questioning. Whenever possible, we encourage readers to listen to the audio recordings to get a greater sense of this meaningful exchange. However, this interview was edited by the interviewee and the transcript should be considered the interviewee's preferred source.

The views expressed by the contributor(s) are solely those of the contributor(s) and do not necessarily reflect the opinions or endorsement of our organization.

THANK YOU

Oral History Interview Transcript

Dziedzic: Today is May 13, 2020, and this is Sarah Dziedzic interviewing Rob Mason for the Village Preservation Oral History Project. And I'll note that we're conducting this interview during a global pandemic, the COVID-19 pandemic, and so we're doing the interview remotely via videoconference. And we're both at our homes because the state is under a PAUSE [Policies Assure Uniform Safety for Everyone] order, where everyone needs to be home unless they are essential workers.

Mason: Yes.

Dziedzic: So can you start by giving a brief introduction to yourself, saying your name and a little bit of background?

Mason: Well, my name is Rob Mason, Robert Paul Mason. I've been in the music and recording field since an early age and have had a long and fulfilling career. And in as much as this history is oriented towards Greenwich Village, I will say that my entire life has been oriented towards this part of town. Actually, in this very room I'm sitting in now, the windows overlook the northern border of the Greenwich Village historic district, which starts right outside my window, so technically I'm just over the line. (But close enough.) So Greenwich Village is very much my home. It's been my terroir for years. And I'm proud to say that it's where the creative arts in America really got its start, not to mention all sorts of very important political and social justice movements, and basically the cultural history of this country really began here well over a hundred years ago. And I like to think that I am myself, in my own very small way, carrying on that tradition.

Dziedzic: And can you talk a little bit about how your neighborhood has changed over the last few months?

Mason: Last few months?

Dziedzic: Yes. How your daily life has changed, and how the neighborhood has changed.

Mason: Well, in the last few months, this being May 2020, obviously, the pandemic change has been quite dramatic. This neighborhood where I'm at is in the middle of what used to be called

the downtown silk-stocking district, with a rather elegant Gold Cost veneer to it, especially on lower Fifth Avenue. The neighborhood has always been an odd combination of elements. Actually, something that isn't mentioned at all on the Virtual Village map (perhaps because it's hiding in plain sight) is that this south-of-Union-Square Greenwich Village neighborhood, between 14th and 10th Street and Fifth Avenue and Broadway, has actually been New York City's (and perhaps America's) leading wholesale antique district for a very long time too. In fact, on the ground floor of this very building that I've been living in for the past forty-five years, there used to be an enormous wholesale antiques store called York Antiques, with a second floor mezzanine literally overflowing with inventory.

Eight years after I moved in is when the Gotham Bar & Grill established themselves in that ground floor location for a thirty-five-year run with Chef Alfred Portale. (They removed the mezzanine to create that airy tall-ceilinged dining room.) Now, sadly, the Gotham has been closed by the pandemic, but Alfred is carrying on with a new namesake restaurant on 18th Street, so that's where you can still enjoy his famous Gotham Bar & Grill restaurant-level cuisine. Only now, Alfred is more in touch with his Italian soul.

Actually, I had a long and collegial relationship with the Gotham Bar & Grill for decades. When they had special events, I would help them with microphones and cables and speakers, etc., if they needed them. They reciprocated by doing a full-service "take-up delivery" by their waiters only for me—at a time when they never did takeout for anyone—complete with all their linens, silver, china and glassware. I had to hound them later to come back to pick everything up because they tended to forget all about it the next day. In fact, I still have some of their stuff they left behind that I sometimes use as souvenirs. So that's all part of my history here in this complex neighborhood.

But the neighborhood right now during the pandemic? Since it's an affluent neighborhood, it has emptied out quite a bit lately. My building is only half full at the moment, but I anticipate that coming in the summer months, when the heat comes, most of my neighbors will be making a getaway. But the truth is that there's nothing like being at home at a time like this. But what can I say? It's a very strange time, but the neighborhood does have an eternal quality. It still doesn't seem to change. But there just aren't enough people left at the moment. Hopefully that will change sooner than later, the next year or two. [00:05:05] Hopefully. Depending on science and a vaccine.

Dziedzic: You mentioned that you've been in Greenwich Village for a long time, so can you tell me some of your early memories of the neighborhood?

Mason: When I was growing up, I spent a lot of time with my uncle, who lived on the intersection of Fourth Street and 12th Street. And we're talking now in the early '50s, mid '50s, and those were the times when it was still truly a bohemian, early Beat era. My uncle was an aspiring novelist, kind of a Norman Mailer wannabe. However you want to put it, he was living the life, and he took me out with him all the time. So I was mingling with him and quite an exotic group of creative people at the time. I was just swept away, and everyone kind of adopted me sort of as a mascot. I was perhaps seven or eight years old. The Village at that time was really what we imagine to be—let's just say, when you're that age, you're in your "wonder years," and everything accordingly seems just wonderful.

My Dad also would take me around, my Mom and Dad. When they were younger, they would come to the Village and go to a place called Café Society. Which was—you probably have heard of it—it was an institution in its day, and the manager was a man by the name of Lou Ganipole, I believe. He ran it for Barney Josephson, the owner. As everyone already knows, the club was truly a trailblazing institution. It was literally the first place where the races could mix in the audience as well as on the stage. My parents were early progressives, and my uncle was there writing the Great American Novel. Later on, after the Café Society days—which were in the late '30s, early '40s, before my parents got married—my uncle established himself in the Village in the '50s (he finally was able to purchase an entire brownstone at 276 West 11th between West 4th and Bleecker Street in the early 1960s), and my dad would regularly take me to the Village Vanguard, starting when I was around eight years old, for Sunday afternoon matinees.

That was when I was first introduced to the live music field. As soon as I heard that live sound, I knew that it was where I wanted to spend my life. It was absolutely astonishing to me. I was eight years old, and hadn't ever heard a live jazz trio before or, for that matter, professionally-played live instruments before. Actually, it was the Junior Mance Trio. He's still, I think, with us, and he actually became a studio client of mine at RPM Studios over thirty years later (at which time he told me that he actually clearly remembered that Vanguard gig because it was a very important, formative moment for him too—he was just twenty-six years old at the

time and it was his first appearance at a legendary downtown jazz club[1]). Anyway, it was only a piano trio, but hearing real live drums, hearing real live bass, and real live piano, in that hallowed room in the apex of its triangular-shaped basement room, was absolutely flabbergasting to my young ears at the time. I would just sit there with Lou, the former Café Society manager, who'd gone on from there to manage the Vanguard for Max Gordon, and groove away. I became something of a Sunday afternoon regular there. Those earliest memories really made a big imprint on me, one that follows me to this very day.

Those were truly magical days in the Village. It's still the same beautiful dreamy tree-lined streets that it was then. And the people who lived there back then were remarkable. My uncle's circle included a truly diverse group of visual artists and writers (including Princess Margaret for a minute), along with the requisite number of kindly beautiful young women on the scene, many of whom I met sitting at the bar in the local taverns, that didn't seem to mind me sitting at the bar back then even though I was so obviously a minor. It was a different time.

PORTION OMITTED

[00:10:09] I kept returning to the Village as I grew older. I had a marvelous experience meeting a local classical orchestra conductor who lived in the Village, his name is—actually was—he just passed a few years ago—Norman Masonson. And he lived over on lower Sixth Avenue, in the same building where Bar Pitti is located in now, on one of the upper floors. He would invite me over, and it was in his tiny apartment there that he commissioned me to write and conduct a piece for the Greenwich Village Symphony Orchestra he conducted, an orchestra of freelance professional classical musicians, a version of which still exists to this day. So, in 1960, I had an opportunity to compose the piece, and conduct it, in the auditorium of PS 61 on West 11th Street, which actually hasn't changed much at all over the years. At any rate, that's all part of the eternality—is that a word?—of the Village.

Later on, I had the opportunity to go to the original High School of Music & Art, up in the City College campus, in an amazing Gothic revival Castle, which is now a landmarked

[1] Julian Clifford Mance, Jr., known as Junior Mance, passed away on January 17, 2021 at age ninety-two.

building. We would go over to the Apollo Theater[2] for all sorts of spectacular multiple-act shows, that would seamlessly transition one after the other using their trademark dollies that could fit an entire orchestra on them—just roll the dollies forward while the prior act was rolled off simultaneously on their own dollies into the wings. For example, in just one of these shows we heard The Manhattans dancing around in their trademark lime green outfits, followed by early Ike and Tina Turner (Ike at far stage right in a spotlight, pointing at Tina at far stage left in her own spotlight: "You stand accused in the Court of Love!" Tina: "I'm guilteeeeee!"). And then they were off to the races with their trademark elaborate R&B set.

But the capper was the entire Duke Ellington Orchestra with the famous original saxophone section that included Paul Gonsalves, Johnny Hodges, and I think also Ben Webster. But what is etched on my memory was at the beginning, Duke himself came out and announced, as he sat down at the piano, "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I want to introduce you to Lulu, who's the best dressed girl in town." And then a dancer came flouncing in from the wings dressed in a boa and little else, and proceeded to execute a full-blown striptease accompanied by one of the greatest jazz bands that ever was, including the Duke himself. I was stunned. Even at that age, I knew I was witnessing something remarkable.

Actually, every time my friends and I would go to the Apollo, we were treated very affectionately by the people there. They would say, "Aww, look at the cute little hippies." This was well before the word hippie went mainstream. From this personal experience, I always believed that the word "hippie" for young hip white people was originally invented by Black people (which makes sense because Black people originated so many things in our culture, so why not also this term?).

But mostly, my friends and I were coming down to the Village after school every year, going to all those clubs, like the Five Spot, the Vanguard, the [Village] Gate, Slugs, to hear all of the jazz greats: Mingus, Miles, Thelonious Monk, and Lee Morgan—over and over again. It was a recurring thing, always returning to this neighborhood. And of course, Washington Square was ground zero back then, as it is now. Although I never really hung out in Washington Square. I was never much of a folkie—my composer training has been in the classical tradition, and I was involved in early electronic music from the classical music tradition from an early age. At that

[2] The following section about the Apollo Theater was conveyed to the interviewer by Mr. Mason in subsequent conversation.

time, I was a big follower of the Darmstadt School, with Karlheinz Stockhausen, all the Germans and Italians, the whole European movement that was going on then. This was also going on at the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center uptown where I would hang out with Vladimir Usachevsky and Bulent Arel after school most days in the basement of Miller Theater on the Columbia University campus. I continued that line of study when I went to school at Oberlin.

That was the only time I was out of the city for an extended period: when I went to Oberlin College. Until I graduated four years later, I got a chance to get out of the Manhattan kind of warped view of things to understand, that there's one hell of a country out there. That was a revelation, and it's a necessary thing for someone who's New York-centric from an early age to understand that there's a whole lot more to this country than just New York and Manhattan. Obviously we are still being reminded of that to this very day, for better or for worse.

After I graduated from Oberlin Conservatory, I came back from northeast Ohio, where Oberlin is located, and zeroed right back to this neighborhood. And in my twenties, I lived in a series of live-work lofts. I was part of a group of creative people in my generation whose lifestyle combined their living and workspace in commercial lofts. I had graduated with a degree in electronic music composition, and I had built my own electronic music studio while I was attending Oberlin by necessity because I was there in the years before they had a proper electronic music studio at the school. I had to be entrepreneurial even back then, and find a way to do it myself, which I did. That's how I graduated with my bachelor's degree, by creating some of my earliest electronic work in my own home-brew studio. A couple of professors and fellow students helped me build it. It was really quite amazing and had never been done before. In retrospect, I don't know how I managed to do that, but it did happen; actually, it was quite simple, as I will explain to you later, if you wish. [00:15:00]

When I came back to the city in the late '60s as a freshly graduated Conservatory composition major, it was an absolutely vibrant time. I quickly involved myself in whatever was going on in Lower Manhattan in the then-current contemporary classical scene, Downtown division. I was basically doing graduate work at NYU, at their Intermedia Department that was dedicated to the notion that all of the arts were going to be interconnected with electronic technology. They were in the building where the old Bleecker Street Cinema used to be, between LaGuardia Place—back then it was still called West Broadway—and Thompson Street, but on the upper floors. So there were many electronic music studios and composers up there who I

worked with, such as Serge Tcherepnin, Rhys Chatham, Ingram Marshall, Maryanne Amacher, as well as good old Mort Subotnick, who was our fearless leader. I worked with all of them, and uptown, I worked with the Columbia-Princeton people there, mostly with Charles Dodge.

At the same time, I built my first live-work loft in the Meatpacking District at 400 West 13th Street, right on the corner of 13th Street and Ninth Avenue (where the restaurant, Catch, is now—or was—located). I needed a space where I could work with my synthesizer, and rehearse my music with fellow musicians, where I wasn't disturbing my neighbors. I could never do that in a normal apartment, so I started building out these commercial spaces where the rent was cheap, and you had to basically install your own utilities, plumbing, electrical, very rudimentary at first but it all functioned well. And in those days in my first loft, my next-door neighbors were Rip Torn and Geraldine Page. And then next to them was a group of musicians called Oregon who had invented and rehearsed their proto-New Age music there. And in those days it was a really wild, raunchy neighborhood packed with leather bars open only at night and during the day it was a fully functioning, bustling wholesale meatpacking district. Almost every weekend night there was literally a carpet of yellow discarded amyl-nitrate cartridges on the cobblestone street, no exaggeration. But I didn't care. I was free to do what I wanted there, and that was most important.

From there, I moved from one neighborhood to the next in the Village area. SoHo for a moment, Chelsea for a moment. Basically buying into lofts just so I could set up my synthesizers—which I built myself, again—and rehearse my music. Those were great days.

PORTION OMITTED

Again, I was in my twenties, creating my own music in the days when things were still pretty much wide open. If I wanted to put on a series of concerts at the Hayden Planetarium, well, it just so happened I could meet a publicist who was working with the Planetarium to expand their audience, so I suggested to them that I put on some concerts with my synthesizer and my band set up right under the dome. I promised to put on a great show and suggested splitting the door with the Planetarium. Before you know it, I was doing it every weekend, and I had their whole staff helping me in every way, including wiring up my foot pedals to the Zeiss star machine. It was incredibly exciting. Back then one could do things like that—no one had ever thought of it before and actually no one has ever done it since.

After the Planetarium president had signed my back-of-the-envelope contract, they gave me free run of the place with their entire technical staff at my disposal. I created a truly elaborate sky show with a cue list that I called out while playing my synthesizer with my band during the concerts. The audience was very keyed up with anticipation before every show[3], so when I started flashing the entire sky bright red while I played a synchronized ostinato pattern with my left hand, cheers from the crowd immediately erupted. Indeed, it was if people in the audience knew they were witnessing something historic and were totally intoxicated with the idea. Spontaneous cheers and applause broke out from time to time throughout the shows. At one point, I would call out into a tiny microphone (these were the days before headsets), "Comets enter left!" and six comets would streak across the sky, and then the same from the right until the sky was entirely crisscrossed with comets. These comets appeared as near-perfect replicas of the real thing—it was uncanny. (Remember: a Zeiss Planetarium machine is a scientific instrument that is a precise reproduction of the known universe at the time, and everything in it.) Another section had me controlling the waxing and waning of first one moon, and then two moons, adding more and more moons until the sky was totally full of incredibly realistic moons waxing and waning in different patterns. At the end of the show, I threw in the kitchen sink. I deployed absolutely every effect they had in the place at a climactic moment while I was taking a cadenza-like solo. It was as if the entire universe with every astrological sign in the heavens came crashing down on the audience. After these shows, people would come up to me and say, "whoa man, you really hit the top there!" It was definitely a peak experience for me and the audience combined, and nothing like that ever happened again at the Hayden Planetarium, to the best of my knowledge.

I earned enough from those concerts to carry me through the rest of the year, and I secured an inflation-adjusted $2 million record contract with CBS/Columbia Records and Columbia Masterworks from those shows to boot. Not bad for a month's work. Again, those were the days. The Planetarium was a bit shell-shocked after those concerts, though. At one point my foot pedal made the Zeiss star machine spin too fast and it stopped moving entirely. They had to fly in technicians in a big rush from West Germany to repair it before the next weekend concerts. I think perhaps after my concerts, the Planetarium got the idea that maybe they could

[3] The following section about the Hayden Planetarium was conveyed to the interviewer by Mr. Mason in subsequent conversation.

just do something simple, like a laser show with pre-recorded music (a la Pink Floyd), where they didn't have to split the door with anyone or contend with having a live band in inside playing under the dome. That's when the very tame Laserium shows got started up there. I think they may have gotten the idea from me, but who knows?

Actually, just before my early 1974 full band concerts up there, there was a comet named Kohoutek that made its perihelion around the sun at the end of 1973. They were having a late afternoon press conference under the Planetarium dome, where they were projecting a live real-time feed from NASA of the perihelion on the dome, and somehow I was asked to accompany the perihelion by improvising to it on my synthesizer. It was quite a scene: the sun was projected on a huge scale to fill almost the entire dome, and the comet showed up as a little black dot that moved slowly but inexorably around this monstrous disc—it was moving at well over a million miles per hour. And there I was, jamming to the real-time perihelion (which is what they call it when a comet whips around the sun). It was a thrilling experience. I felt like I was at one with the comet. Of course, there was an eight-minute speed-of-light delay, but it was as real-time as you can get, even after taking into account the speed of light. The press corps didn't really understand why I was there in the first place but at the end of the event they clustered around me, quizzically asking questions, and the Planetarium staff was rather perplexed that I had somehow managed to upstage the comet, which wasn't my intention at all.

Dziedzic: I wanted to ask you a few follow-up questions about some of the things that you've talked about so far. So my first question is actually, you mentioned going to Greenwich Village to travel around with your uncle, and I wondered where you were living with your parents.

Mason: They started out living in the London Terrace area, and then they moved to Queens. But I was soon commuting back to the City, eventually to go to high school every day in Harlem. So I was sort of all over the city back then. But, yes, I was very much living with my parents. I had a loving set of parents who took very good care of me, and were immensely supportive—and I'm very grateful for that. I didn't mean to give the impression they weren't absolutely central to my life growing up—they were actually everything to me and I wouldn't have gotten anywhere close to where I am today without their devoted love and support, for which I am eternally grateful. The same goes for my dear sister; there was a time when she was my biggest fan, and she still lives just a few blocks away from me in the Village. And as long as I'm mentioning family, I

must say that it all would never have been possible without the love, support, and partnership I have shared with my wife, who is my true soulmate and my greatest ally through life. I have been fortunate because she has chosen to share this loft with me for the past forty years, bearing witness to almost everything that happened.

Dziedzic: And where in Queens did you live?

Mason: It was in a place called Forest Hills Gardens, which is right near the tennis stadium. An absolutely gorgeous area. It still is an idyllic haven, one of New York City's first private corporation planned communities, which was actually designed by the son of [Frederick Law] Olmsted, the designer of Central Park. It was built to resemble an old Tudor-style English village, with enormous, beautiful, Tudor-style houses with winding gravel lanes and 19th-century English lampposts, and row after row of gigantic old growth trees and manicured landscaping—it was an absolutely enchanted place to grow up, and also very protected. Of course, when you're young you take it all for granted and can't wait to get on that subway to get out of there and go into the city, but it was a wonderful environment for to grow up in for children, who all need normality and stability. So I had plenty of that as a basis to jump off from, and God bless my Mom and Dad for providing that for me so beautifully.

Dziedzic: And tell me about, I guess starting from, if your first exposure to music was really kind of in a social setting, how did you go about beginning to study music? And learn about—

Mason: I showed an early aptitude, and I got a lot of encouragement from my folks, and they sent me off to be educated early on. I was entranced with composition from the beginning—and again, we're talking when I was single digits—I was listening to Stravinsky and Beethoven non-stop and I was soaking up their scores. I would go to the city to a renowned classical sheet music shop and clubhouse called Patelson's across the street from the back of Carnegie Hall. It was a magical place to a child, just the smell of—well, you know how new books smell. There's something about freshly printed music—it left me with a very particular, olfactory Proustian memory. It was all part of the experience. [00:25:25].

At any rate, I was acquiring those scores. and was playing them on the piano. I started writing and was sent to get early theory and composition instruction, and I would go to some

pretty serious summer music camps and get very involved with the professionals teaching in these camps. They gave me a lot of encouragement in those early days.

PORTION OMITTED

Then when I went to High School of Music & Art, one of the city's specialized schools that were wonderful in those days in that they were magnet schools, which selected students from every part of the city, all types of ethnicities, so I had a chance to get comfortable in a multi-cultural setting early on—it was the most natural thing in the world to me. Just a normal part of life. I forget what the original question was—how did we get to that? [laughs]

Dziedzic: [laughs] I was asking about how you were instructed in music.

Mason: Oh yes. I started attending college classes at the Mannes School of Music, and I had private instructors there, and I had private lessons with a very well-known composer in his own right, Edgard Varese. It was only a few lessons, and I remember—he was an emigree, and he was encouraging, and at the same time somewhat intimidating. He was my hero back then when I was fourteen years old. My mother, bless her, somehow tracked him down and made the arrangements because she knew how much I idolized him. (Lucky me to have had a mother like that.) Only much later did I realize how fortunate I was to have had some quality time with the "Father of Electronic Music" so early in my life. And then the private lessons at Mannes with William Sydeman were also very influential, as were my private studies with Eric Salzman.

PORTION OMITTED

I'd learned a lot at the original Mannes School on East 74th Street. I was attending actual college classes when I was at a preparatory age. But of course, Oberlin was where I had my chief education, which afterwards continued at NYU [New York University]. So those early years were wonderful. I was able to avoid the typical American high school experience by going to a specialized high school in New York, in a Gothic castle with gargoyles and panoramic tower rooms, and amazing acoustics. I mean, we were all getting high off the building. [00:30:07] We didn't know it at the time but we were in a kind of version of the movie called *Fame* that took place in the High School of Performing Arts, which of course was in Midtown. We were running around all full of ourselves at "The Castle" having a blast. And not only did we go to all these

concerts in the Village, and at the Apollo Theater in Harlem, but we would, for some reason, get up early in the morning and go down to the Village at six or seven o'clock and hang around with the people who had been there all night, and then go to school from there. [Dziedzic laughs] I don't know why we were doing that—we were so young and full of excess energy.

Dziedzic: Can you talk about the interchange between what you're learning in school, in a formal environment, and what you're learning by approximation, or by listening? By hanging out in the Village and seeing musicians there.

Mason: Well, hmm.

Dziedzic: How was it synthesizing for you in your approach to learning?

Mason: Well, I was synthesizing my formal training with what I was acquiring through osmosis by being exposed to the master practitioners themselves while they were actually practicing their art. That combination was ineffable. One just absorbs it all and becomes a part of the culture and the culture becomes a part of you. It was very helpful in building an early sense of confidence that came in handy later on because I really felt like I belonged almost no matter where I was.

When one has an opportunity to hear people like John Coltrane live every night when they're at the peak of their powers making their first breakthroughs, and at the same time one is studying music theory and composition as an adolescent, one's brain is really wide open and is synthesizing and absorbing everything in ways that you're not completely aware of at the time. The front and back of your brain are still disconnected (and I've read that the front and the back don't actually come together until you're about thirty years old). Some of us may never really get that front and back together, and maybe that could be a good thing in a way (or not). I had a chance to hear multiple masters perform over time and actually understand those experiences through the lens of the music theory and compositional techniques that I was simultaneously absorbing during my early formal training. I think that combination is the best education in the world. Nobody can teach that—one has to experience it firsthand and actually live it. So yes, that's a very good question. A lot of those formative sorts of things were going on in my mind during those years. Thank you for drawing that out.

Dziedzic: Yes. And you mentioned that when you were at Oberlin you had to build your own studio because there wasn't a proper electronic studio, so—

Mason: That's a story in and of itself.

Dziedzic: —what was involved in that?

Mason: Well, what was involved in that: when I had actually arrived at the Oberlin Conservatory, I was already an enthusiast for electronic music from the classical music tradition. There was no such thing as EDM [electronic dance music]. There was no such thing as MIDI [musical instrument digital interface], which was not in popular music yet. All that was decades away from being part of the popular music scene. But electronic music was already my passion even back then and I was quite disappointed when I got to Oberlin to discover they had absolutely no electronic music studio facilities whatsoever. But in those days, I believe Columbia University was an outlier in the sense that they always had an extensive facility—now they have the oldest facility of its kind in the country and I had already spent some time there. At that time though, I expected to find at least something there [at Oberlin] because it was top tier school. [00:34:56]

Instead, I found myself being asked to compose for woodwind quintets, and write choral music, and that sort of thing. Oberlin was called the "Harvard of the Midwest'' at the time, so a lot of the student body was drawn from the Midwest and there was a large organ department comprising young church organists from the region and beyond. So, especially in those days, that part of the country was very conservative. So I found that they regarded me as the city kid, as some sort of exotic person. The country was far more atomized than it is today. Telecommunications were pretty much non-existent, except for broadcast network TV, and we were definitely far from the internet. Anyway, I found that I really wanted to work in the classical electronic music medium that I always attracted to, and having to get along with these conservative classical musicians from the Midwest was a little too much of a culture gap.

Anyway, the year that I arrived at Oberlin, they had just opened a new Conservatory building, a beautiful new Japanese architect-designed extravaganza, for the music school by the world-renowned Minoru Yamasaki, who was already in the process of realizing his design for the New York World Trade Center Twin Towers. In the student lounge at the center of this new Conservatory complex, there were some vending machines that everybody got their coffee and sandwiches from for over three years. So I decided that since there's no proper electronic music studio for me here like there should be, I clearly needed to build my own studio. I went over to

the Dean's office and met with him and the President of the Conservatory, Bob Fountain. I asked them very nicely, "What's going on with the income for those vending machines?" So they called in the—what do they call him? The bursar?

Dziedzic: Bursar.

Mason: The bursar. I asked the bursar, again, very nicely, "What is going on with that income?" He said, "that income goes into a bank account—." "Well, how much is in that account?" So we all take a look, and it turns out to be a well over a thousand dollars, which was a lot of money in those ancient days. And they offered it to me, saying, "Well, ok, since we can't provide you with a proper electronic music studio right now as we should be able to do, you can use this money to build your own studio." At the time, I was living off campus in a really wonderful romantic little artist's garret overlooking the new Conservatory. I gratefully accepted the money they so generously offered me. I hired some fellow students to build some oscillators and other electronic equipment, and purchased a top-quality Viking tape recorder (made in Minneapolis). And one of the professors (Robert Drummond) who had a basement workshop and liked to build things, and knew how to make switches and panels, was kind enough to help me actually fabricate a little studio for myself, where I could work with electronic-generated sounds and record and manipulate them. Thanks to all the kind and good-hearted assistance I received, I was able to do quite a bit of good work that way, and that's what I graduated on. It was kind of a minor miracle pulling that off as an undergraduate student, and I couldn't have done it without the help from the community I found myself in.

Towards the end of my time at Oberlin, some of the other Conservatory students got wind of what had happened, and they started asking questions like, "How did he get that money? What happened?" A few times, people would confront me and ask, "What did you do? Why did you get all that money?" I told them, "I just asked for it and it was for a completely worthy cause." A few people weren't thrilled about it (to say the least). They just didn't understand that I was simply correcting a glaring gap in what the school offered at the time, and that a proper electronic music studio at the school was legitimately needed. That went way over quite a few people's heads at the time—so many people didn't have a clue. And wouldn't you know, the year right after I graduated was the year that Oberlin actually opened a state-of-the-art, advanced electronic music studio and program. So I like to think that perhaps I may have been part of the

impetus that caused them to do that. Anyway, that was what started me off on this build your own DIY [do-it-yourself] kind of approach of building my own instruments and studios later.

When I came back to New York in the late ‘60s, it was a boom time in technology and musical culture. In the ‘60s, everything was happening, very happening, and even “Happenings” were happening. It was a very exciting time to graduate into. I’ve already told you how the moment I came back to the Village in 1968, I started working with Morton Subotnick, et al., at the electronic music studios at the NYU Intermedia Department over the old Bleecker Street Cinema. I also assisted Mort with mounting all sorts of live performance installations and dance concerts at the Electric Circus on St. Mark’s Place with live performers such as Elaine Summers, who wore battery packs to trigger the electronics.

At the same time, I worked with Steve Reich for a short time when he first came back from Africa. Steve had brought all sorts of authentic percussion instruments with him, and had transcribed the old traditional patterns to be played on them from the master drummers in Ghana. We would unpack the instruments and sit there playing those patterns on them together and become totally transported. We almost levitated together doing that. It was as if the ancient spirits lived in the traditional patterns and, when we played them together, the interlocking effect released the very specific mesmerizing magic that they were designed to create. At the same time, Philip Glass and his ensemble was also just starting out and for a while I played and rehearsed with both of them, and there were times when Phil and Steve would actually be playing together with me and a few other guys in the same rehearsal group. [00:40:29] That was before Phil and Steve pretty much went their separate ways.

Again, it was a very exciting time, full of ferment. I just wanted to get out there and do my own thing and not become a cog in someone else’s machine. In retrospect, it might have done me some good to be someone else’s cog for a little while, but of course, in my younger years, I was in a big hurry after being cooped up in Oberlin for so long. So I left Steve and Phil and Mort behind pretty quickly (perhaps too quickly) and went off to do my own thing.

At that time, there wasn’t such a thing as a polyphonic synthesizer keyboard instrument––or a synthesizer commercially available where you could play more than one note at a time—so I created one of the first polyphonic synthesizers (perhaps the very first one). I composed a new body of work, put together some musicians, and used the instrument as a vehicle for putting on some very high-spirited shows at some fascinating new venues like The Kitchen, when it first

opened up at the Mercer Art Center. The Kitchen still exists today in a very different location, in West Chelsea, but I still think of it as part of my roots, as it were.

I was lucky to get some spectacular reviews[4] for those shows (mainly in *The Village Voice*, which was the main Village weekly newspaper at the time—everybody read it), and before I knew it, the place was packed with people flocking to hear me and check out what all the fuss was about. It was almost like my "debut," if you will. I was totally off-the-hook in those days—the excitement I generated on stage was beyond intense. When you first get your work out there, and the world is first discovering you, and you're packing them in, there's a special "state of grace" that descends and hovers around you for a while, and continues to attract to you people far and wide. I was living a dream and floating on air at that time.

From all of that buzz, I was able to obtain a fantastic recording contract from the legendary media executive and label owner, Jac Holzman, at Elektra Records, and for a while, I was his pet project of the moment at Elektra Records—Jac actually ordered the production department to put a special glossy finish on my album cover that cost him an extra nickel per album, which was something he had never done before. He meant it as a token of his esteem. For my first record for them I put together a wonderful group of musicians that included the renowned drummer Steve Gadd and saxophonist Michael Brecker. My Elektra album was among the first mainstream labels that those now very well-known musicians actually ever appeared on. We were all in our formative years back then.

We recorded[5] the first Elektra album at the legendary Studio A at the original Record Plant at 321 West 44th Street, more or less immediately after the Jimi Hendrix Experience had spent almost two years creating their breakthrough album, *Electric Ladyland*, with Gary Kellgren, who had just built The Record Plant as the first studio with a plush living room environment with creature comforts for musicians, which was revolutionary at the time (most recording studios back then were rather dismal antiseptic facilities). This was where George Harrison had just mixed his landmark *The Concert for Bangladesh* with Phil Spector, and where The Velvet Underground and Bruce Springsteen were in the process of recording their first albums too. Jay

[4] A reprint of the review from *The Village Voice* printed on April 27, 1972 is available on the Facebook page @StardriveWithRobertMason. The following section about Mason's early performances was conveyed to the interviewer by Mr. Mason in subsequent conversation.
[5] The following section about the recording and remixing of Mason's first Elektra album was conveyed to the interviewer by Mr. Mason in subsequent conversation.

Messina and Shelly Yakus engineered, and none other than a twenty-year-old Jimmy Iovine (now of Beats/Dr. Dre fame) was the assistant. It was a heady time, and quite the scene to be recording my debut album, in that particular room, in that particular studio, at that particular truly seminal moment in music and recording studio history. Mr. Holzman was thrilled with the results. He showed his enthusiasm by heavily promoting the album after its release.

He also decided to make that album the flagship demonstration record for the new CD-4 Quad system that Warner Brothers was pushing to be the new standard for Quadrophonic Sound on a mass scale—that was back when Quad was the next big thing. So they flew me out to Los Angeles twice, the first time to do the stereo mix (engineered by Fritz Richmond) and another time as the Quad "poster boy" to do the Quad mix (engineered by Bruce Morgan) at their special newly equipped Quad control room at Elektra Studios, at the corner of Santa Monica and La Cienega. I stayed at the legendary rock and roll hotels, Chateau Marmont and the Tropicana in Hollywood, before they became the branded icons they are today, and had quite the West Coast wild ride out there as a major record company's "flavor of the month," as you might imagine. But I wasn't really there to party—I was there to work. I was a very serious determined young man at the time.

Anyway, I found that, while remixing my album in Quad in Elektra's newly outfitted Quad Control Room, I immensely enjoyed working with manipulating sound in space because it was a realization of my notions about music-as-art object, and I had an opportunity to actualize them on a mass scale with a Quad release for, hopefully, hundreds of thousands of homes equipped with Quad playback systems. (I didn't know at the time that Quad would never catch on in the way that the big record companies wanted it to. It was quickly supplanted by mass-produced 5.1 movie surround sound playback systems for the home as well as for movie theaters.)

On the other side of the physical—and cultural—world, Karlheinz Stockhausen had just realized the most spectacular vision of a multi-channel performance space in his fifty-channel, spherical 360-degree concert hall built for him by the German government at the 1970 Osaka World's Fair. So my Quad mix in Hollywood was my first taste of multi-channel playback systems, my "first bite of that apple," and the beginning of a life-long fascination with multi-channel speaker installations with source-point spatial programming. It was that seminal experience with Quad in Los Angeles that led to my Soundmurals project later on in the 1980s.

At this time, I am still continuing research in this area as part of my current RPM Commissioning Fund project.

So there I was, flying high with Elektra, but before I knew it, David Geffen merged [Elektra] with his Asylum Records label, and he didn't renew my contract. As a matter of fact, he unceremoniously dropped me, along with more than half of the existing Elektra roster. But that didn't slow me down. I just kept moving along and went out and conjured up my Hayden Planetarium concerts. As a result of them, I was signed by Bruce Lundvall (another legendary recording executive) to Columbia Records (also known as CBS Records back then). At the same time, I was signed to Columbia Masterworks by Tom Frost [Sr.], who was another storied producer and recording executive, this time in the classical music world.

Accordingly, I then proceeded to create another body of work for both of them.[6] Don DeVito (who was Bob Dylan's producer at the time) actually produced my CBS album, but he really didn't know what to do with me, so he was pretty hands-off in the studio. But Don was an all-around great guy and a classic, dedicated, record company honcho. We recorded in the symphony orchestra-sized, big room at the CBS studio [Columbia 30th Street Studio] called "The Church" because it was built inside a beautiful, enormous, old, high-ceilinged existing Greek Orthodox Church on East 30th Street. It was another great honor to record in such a hallowed room, the same place where many landmark recordings were created back in the day, such as Miles Davis's *Kind of Blue*. I was told to watch out for the "ghost of Mantovoni" when I wandered around in the cavernous main room—it was so huge you could almost get lost out there.

It was one of the last of the old unionized recording studios, so the engineers were a completely different breed from those at the independent studios, like Record Plant or Electric Lady. They were almost like Abbey Road lifers, some of whom actually wore white coats in the studio. They were also great guys and I got along well with them well (except when I kept touching the faders). They all had the energy of people who had been around since the beginning of time, and would continue to be around forever too. Of course, that was not to be—there are now cookie-cutter condos in a stupendously bland, new high-rise building on the site where that beautiful old Greek Orthodox church used to be. It's such a loss and such a shame.

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[6] The following section about Stardrive's recording for CBS was conveyed to the interviewer by Mr. Mason in subsequent conversation.

At the same time that I was recording with my band Stardrive at The Church on East 30th Street, I created my Columbia Masterworks contemporary classical pure electronic music album.[7] Masterworks literally built a separate studio for me for this project in my studio in my West 22nd Street loft. They carted over and set up several tape machines, a console, and effects equipment, including one of those huge German EMT 140 reverberation plates, all trucked over crosstown from The Church.

The two pieces I created for that project are called *Plantar Audition* and *Psychoalchemy.* They were both meditations from the Arica Institute and its storied leader, Oscar Ichazo. (I studied with him extensively in the early '70s.) Oscar declared at the time that that work was "so much more than music!" He used it in his workshops for many years after that—dozens of people laying flat on their backs allowing the music to enter through the soles of their feet—that was the "plantar" part—and exiting through their ears and crowns of their heads. This was another form of "deep listening" I was exploring at the time.

Anyway, again, after releasing all those albums for all those record companies, I decided at that time, at the end of my twenties, that it was time for a change. I had been touring so much in support of all those albums, dragging my synthesizer around, etc. It was exhausting, even for a twenty-something. At that point, I decided I wanted to go back into the studio, so of course I needed to build my own studio again, and that studio, RPM Studios (named after my initials), that I originally built for myself eventually became a Greenwich Village fixture in the area just south of Union Square.

Dziedzic: Rob, you froze on my end. I'm wondering if you can still hear me. [00:45:01]

Mason: Ok here.

Dziedzic: Ok, we're back. Before you start talking about your studio, I wanted to ask you some questions about electronic music. When did it start to appear to you as a genre, or as a field of experimentation?

Mason: Well, it was originally coming out of a few centers. The most important was in Cologne, in Germany, called the Darmstadt School. Which included, first and foremost, Karlheinz

[7] The following section about recording *Plantar Audition* and *Psychoalchemy* for Columbia Masterworks was conveyed to the interviewer by Mr. Mason in subsequent conversation.

Stockhausen, who in his day was the most major figure in the field, but it also included Luciano Berio, Earle Brown, Mauricio Kagel, and many others. However, there was an important center with Pierre Boulez in Paris and Centre Pompidou. And again, in this country, Columbia University, Princeton University, the Bell Labs were early progenitors. But that technology was, compared to this fully computerized day and age, it wasn't even horse and buggy—it was like "oxen cart technology" compared to today. It was mostly working with tape, which was a sub-genre unto itself called musique concrete, and that was led by Edgard Varese (among others), who was one of its first exponents, and one of my earliest influences and teachers.

And so working with tape was the thing, along with the whole idea of the recording studio as a musical instrument: creating tape loops by using microphone stands and running the tape around the room, and then back across the playback head of the tape machine, and then perhaps playing it backwards and changing the speed to create your sonic raw material. I worked like that with the tape machines, as well using oscillators and electronic instruments, with the idea of combining the analog acoustic derived materials with the purely electronic sounds. It was just a wonderful time to be working in the field. We all thought we were part of a revolution because, the way I thought of it was: for the first time in the history of music, we were creating music as an art object, kind of like a painting or a sculpture is an art object. Of course, a recording is not a unique art object, like an original painting, but suddenly it seemed possible that a new art form was being created: music as a recording that exists as something separate from a performance. And to this day, it's a concept has become very much a part of our culture.

Unfortunately, recordings have become grossly devalued now. There was a time when a recording had more inherent value because it took a lot of specialized equipment and expertise to actually create a wonderful recording. Now, almost anyone with an iPhone can do that. And the market for recordings has collapsed a long time ago and music creators see very little income from their recordings now, which is why the current scene is so excruciating because the one income stream left—concertizing—is now facing in an extinction event with the current pandemic. I'm doing what I can to help but it's an insane moment for composers and performers now, both in the theater and in music. But back in those days, I found it absolutely thrilling that you could create a work of musical art that for the first time had a unique existence outside of the realm of performance itself. It seemed revolutionary at the time, that one could skip all the hassle of dealing with live musicians: paying them, rehearsing them, transporting them to and from a

venue, getting an audience into the seats, and arranging for everything to be properly lit and sound-reproduced, and advertised and promoted, it's endless. [00:50:21] Suddenly, it seemed that we could just skip the whole hassle of concertizing and go directly to the finished object or product. It was an exciting concept to me at the time. Does this relate to the original question? I think it does, right?

Dziedzic: Yes! How electronic music became an important space for experimentation for you, and performance, as well.

Mason: Well, yes. I was just thrilled with this concept, and it still excites me today. But of course, there's much more to it than those early simplistic thoughts. Right now, I'm more interested in the combination of electronic and acoustic sounds you can only create in a recording studio, with the sound of all those wonderful acoustic instruments. To me, that is a marriage made in heaven. And many composers in the latest younger generation are creating that sort of electroacoustic music, and I want to do what I can to encourage them, and selectively commission some of them along those lines going forward. There's something ineffable about mixing acoustic and electronic elements, if it's done well. Live performance with technology, either live or recorded (with or without acoustic instruments), has become almost commonplace, but in my early days it was almost unheard of. By the way, that's what we're listening to it in the background right now.

Dziedzic: I also wanted to ask you about the polyphonic synthesizer, if you could explain how that was new, and why you needed to invent it. I think, me personally, not knowing a whole lot about it, I know about the Moog, but that's about it

Mason: Yes, the Moog. Those early Moogs were simple—they all had black and white keyboards, and they only played one note at a time. If you wanted to play a chord, it was not possible. Just one monophonic note at a time. One could play those notes with portamento and glissando, etc., but it was always only one note at a time. And, those early Moogs weren't even pressure sensitive. It wasn't like a pianoforte, where you can play it loudly or softly, depending on how hard you strike the keyboard. No, it was always just the same level of amplitude, no matter how hard or lightly you strike it. So to me, that was unacceptable, and I set out to rectify the situation by simply commissioning electronic designers to create banks of oscillators and

filter circuits, and then kind of crudely patched things all together. It was not like an advanced electronic design, really. But I was working with some seminal people in that field at the time, and I combined it with some modules from various other manufacturers such as Buchla, and there was another called ARP. And I created a pastiche of my own "home brew" of modules from those various manufacturers and assembled them into a keyboard that I managed to make operate in a pressure-sensitive way with envelope detectors, connected polyphonically to the oscillator banks. And that way I was just able to function and actually participate in a group setting of musicians, and being able to play more than just a single note a time and not be like a glorified theremin. You know what a theremin is, right?

Dziedzic: Yes.

Mason: It's a really odd (but beautiful) vintage sound.

Dziedzic: And you were talking about some of the places where you played music, with Stardrive, and I wonder if you could talk about a few more of the clubs in the Village where you played.

Mason: Well, of course. One of them was called the Bottom Line, which in its day, it was one of the main venues in town, back in the '70s. It was actually the best venue. If I go back earlier, back to the days on Bleecker Street, when Bleecker Street was the place to go, there was a club––I think it's still there. [00:55:15] It's a shadow of its former self, but someone is keeping it going. It's still called the Bitter End, but a guy named Paul Colby was running it back then. Then there was the Village Gate from Art d'Lugoff (now Le Poisson Rouge), and there was the Garrick Theater, but I never performed at those places, I'm just remembering them. There was also a club called Cafe Au Go Go, which, despite its rather honky-tonk name was a very serious venue where I did perform. At that time the Grateful Dead was playing in New York for literally the very first time and they were in the dressing room right next door to my dressing room passionately arguing about burning issues like "Does the living Buddha really exist?" and we'd all get passionately caught up in that. It was as if we were all possessed at the time.

Indeed, those were the days—yes, I performed in those clubs, and those performances were mainly promotional showcases. It wasn't like any of these club dates were about earning a steady living. It wasn't something I would do routinely. It was a way to get people from the

record companies, management companies, booking agents, to come and see and hear your work. So that hopefully one of them would sign you and take you under their wing, and offer you a recording contract, a booking contract, or a management contract—that was the purpose. Again, I might have been better off if I had just tried to cultivate an audience on a more long-term basis. When I played in these clubs, it was to get that under my belt, to get people to come and see me, always in a big hurry (perhaps too big a hurry) to advance to the next stage. I remember a place called Gerde's—have you ever heard of it?

Dziedzic: Yes.

Mason: The rest of the name was Folk City, and it was a place where [Bob] Dylan first performed (at the original location). Again, the folk scene was never my bailiwick, but somehow I was playing relatively avant-garde electronic music at Gerde's Folk City. But it fit right in because the people who were booking the club (Alan Pepper and Stanley Snadowsky) were totally into it being as eclectic as possible. So despite the name of the club, the performers were all over the place way beyond folk music. I was performing in that little couple of square blocks between West 3rd and Houston and Sixth Avenue and West Broadway that was really a teeming cultural ecosystem at the time. There is still a remnant sense of that there today. But the area was vibrant back then. It was really alive with all sorts of people doing all sorts of original work there, and glad I had a chance to have participated in it very briefly.

But those clubs were (some of them) very dicey. There wasn't much of a stage. Really it was just a platform. And of course, in those days, we didn't we didn't have roadies. We would drag our gear in ourselves, set it all up, and then pull it all out again. It was the early days, you know? But it was being part of a culture when it was in one of its most vital moments. But again, I was always impatiently moving onto the next thing. I think some musicians and songwriters spent their entire lives and careers playing in those clubs. For them that was the be all, end all. To me, for better or for worse, they were just stepping stones.

Actually, I would like to take this opportunity to set the record straight about a notorious incident that occurred during my stage performing years.[8] Before and after this incident, I had

[8] The following section about a performance at Radio City Music Hall was conveyed to the interviewer by Mr. Mason in subsequent conversation.

played dozens of successful concerts that went off without a hitch. But of course, what the internet is filled with are rumors about "what really happened" during and after at my big opening night debut for my second album on CBS Records at Radio City Music Hall. I was opening for Jefferson Starship. My somewhat overzealous manager had arranged for the 100-foot-wide elevator stage there to be covered with highly reflective mylar mirror. So there I was with my synthesizer and full band, playing away while we were slowly raised up on the mirrored elevator stage to a rather astounding effect. (From my perspective the klieg light on me looked like the sun slowly rising over the orchestra pit.) The show was going smoothly and the audience was reacting well, but the concert promoter, Ron Delsener, had not provided proper security for me, I think because I was just the opening act.

One audience member who I believe was under the influence of something seemed to be so attracted to me and what I was doing that he decided he wanted to "merge with me." (I was told later he had said that.) So he slowly made his way up to stage right behind me and then suddenly threw himself at me and knocked me and my synthesizer to the ground. The show unceremoniously stopped at that point. Some people in the audience thought that it was all part of the show theatrics and started cheering. Ha! Go figure. It was surreal. But it was after the incident that the rumor mill kicked into high gear and it continues to this very day on the internet. So, to set the record straight and hopefully end all the speculation: no, I didn't die in that incident (the reports of my death in that incident were greatly exaggerated). And no, I wasn't psychically scarred for life from that incident, and it wasn't why I didn't make more records after that back then. (I will explain the natural evolution to my next stage to you later.)

My hyperactive manager regarded it as an opportunity, though, and negotiated an immense insurance settlement. I didn't care about that (I was fine). I finished the week with several more nightly shows that all went smoothly. But human nature being what it is, nobody especially remembers things that go well. They especially remember what goes wrong, especially if it happens on a spectacular scale. So, once and for all, that incident did <u>not</u> define me. In fact, New York's finest captured the assailant and dragged him over to me in the wings and offered to allow me to punch him in the nose for ruining my show. The poor guy looked like a terrified animal who clearly was out of his mind. I couldn't physically retaliate against him—that's definitely not my style, but I always thought those officers were outrageous for even thinking I would want to strike back against my assailant, and for offering him up for me to

assault him as some sort of street justice right there in the wings of Radio City Music Hall. But that sort of bad behavior is still what goes on with some of the police to this very day, I guess. But that's a whole other story. Anyway, thank you for allowing me to set the record straight about that incident, hopefully once and for all, for what it's worth.

Dziedzic: You mentioned that each loft that you moved into, that you made some variations on your studio set-up. I'm wondering if you can explain some of those, maybe leading up to ultimately what you built in your formal studio. [01:00:02]

Mason: Again, the first space was one of the more dramatic ones because it was in a wholesale meat market when it truly was a functioning wholesale meat market. I was so young—twenty-two years old, so naïve, really. I saw that the rent was thirty-three dollars a month. Actually, it was thirty-three dollars and a certain amount of cents, thirty-three dollars and twenty-eight cents. That was for the two top floors at 400 East 13th Street on the corner of Ninth Avenue. The place had already been occupied by some rather unusual people because I found that every floorboard had already been painted a different color of the rainbow. Actually, I think it might have been a cathouse at some point in time.

At any rate, I was curious as to why there was a big stainless steel plate mounted on the front of the building. I asked myself, why was that there? The first night that I slept in the place, that question was answered after midnight, when an enormous double-long tractor-trailer truck backed up, and proceeded to disgorge one enormous hanging hog after another, sliding down those meat racks, and repeatedly slamming into the side of the building against that very same stainless steel plate, making an enormous noise, shaking the entire building. And that was a moment when I looked up at the ceiling, and said oh my god, what have I done? I was able to very quickly seal the front end up fairly well and sleep as far away from all that, and it was fine. I stayed there for about two years.

Gordon Matta-Clark (the renowned artist and building cutter, and son of the world famous surrealist painter, Roberto Matta) took one of the floors and we were buddies for a while over there, and we shared a lot of things together. It being the wholesale meat market, the air was thick with lard. Gordon was working sculptures in what he called cutting-edge materials such as green mold and maggots (on the roof), all of which thrived in the meat market. (Yikes!) Then after that, I moved to a series of spaces, where there was always a thing called the key money.

You'd make your own improvements, and then somebody else would come along, they'd pay you the "key money" (which essentially reimbursed you for your improvements), and you were then able to transfer the lease.

From there I went to another space in SoHo, which was on the ground floor. And in those days, I was part of a collective group of musicians called Free Life Communication at the Space for Innovative Development at 344 West 36th Street, set up by Samuel Rubin (of Fabergé fame). We all hung out and put on concerts there and jammed a lot. I was able to rehearse there in my own room. Some of the players went on to be major figures in the jazz world. Others disappeared into obscurity. Those also were great times. Everyone was, again, in the formative years of their careers and lives at the time.

After that, I was in a space in SoHo, a ground floor loft, on West Broadway between Prince and Spring. They have, now, four entire shops squeezed into the same storefront, but this was just, I think, basically a rough, ground floor space with only a cold-water sink, and that's it. I was there for about six to eight months and it was a little too rough for me. From there I moved to a penthouse loft space off Union Square on 17th Street, 13 East 17th Street—the building is still there. It was right down the block from Max's Kansas City in its heyday. Those were some of Max's Kansas City's most vital years. (I would later play in the Max's Kansas City club upstairs, in support of my first Elektra album, with a Welsh band called Badfinger on the bill.) Back then, I was something of a denizen there for a while, when you could almost live off the free hors d'oeuvres they served in the afternoon—not that I did that very often. I was in that tiny live-work penthouse loft and used it as a practice room with my synthesizer all squeezed in there with the other players. I think my rehearsing was heard all over the neighborhood for a while because the sound would project due to the fact that I was in a rooftop location on the top of a relatively tall building.

From there I moved into a musician's loft building at 139 West 19th Street, where everyone had their own small floor. It was really was quite an illustrious building with a storied history (Miles Davis lived there for a minute, as did Chick Corea, who preceded me on the second floor). At the time I was there, Mike Brecker and Dave Liebman also each had floors there. The building was mainly for jazz musicians, and I felt fortunate to be there. I was in and out pretty quickly. So while I wasn't exactly a perfect fit for that building, I did use the loft the

way it was meant to be used, though—to create and rehearse my highly unusual and rather singular post-genre fusion music.

Eventually, I landed at 135 West 22nd Street, between Sixth and Seventh Avenues. I had two floors of the building. It was actually originally used by Jack Tworkov, who was a well-known New York School painter from another generation. [01:05:16] And that became my headquarters until I came down here at 12 East 12th Street. I again had two floors there, so I could rehearse in the afternoon and evening on the lower floor when they weren't vibrating the floor below with their metal punching machines during the earlier part of the day, and it was ok for me to do what I needed to do because I could go upstairs to the top floor and be away from all that overnight into the next day.

When I finally wound up on 12 East 12th Street, I had developed quite an aptitude for scouting these buildings, and I knew how to circle around and zero in on exactly where I wanted to be, and I knew this double-wide building where I am today would be a great place to be. At the time, during the mid-'70s, I noticed that you could tell which buildings were basically abandoned, and you get to know the building's superintendents, and can get them to show you around upstairs. I discovered the top two floors of this building virtually abandoned. I could have had them both, which would have been an insane amount of space—twelve thousand square feet—but I was designing and building my recording studio by then and I didn't want to deal with skylights, mainly because of security concerns, because those were the bad old days in New York, when the city was verging on bankruptcy, and it was a lot more dangerous back then.

The building was a little sketchy back then anyway with zero security (the street door was open twenty-four hours a day and the elevator had no key locks), but the building was chock full of quirky tenants and characters already. Each floor was like an O. Henry (the author) story with an elaborate history. So many interesting things went on in this building. The third floor was at one time a headquarters for the Socialist Party of America, being so close to Union Square when the area was something of a socialist paradise. They published *Workers World* out of there. There was a player piano repair business on the top floor with an enormous player pipe organ right over my head. Then there I was, building an extensive recording studio on the floor below. All kinds of interesting different businesses were already operating here, and all of them are long gone now.

PORTION OMITTED

Mason: When I came here, there was literally no electricity on my floor at all. So I had to hire a licensed electrician to install my own Con-Ed [electricity] meter and risers to the floor, and I put in a tremendous amount of power because I knew if I was going to have a proper recording studio I would need a lot of power. To this day, I'm so happy I did that because I still use it all. I also had to install floating reinforced concrete floors here because the studio was on top of a factory where industrial equipment was located—there were machines stamping out pieces of leather for wallets on the floor below—so I wound up scooping out the entire floor, and installing a floating concrete floor assembly with floating concrete walls and a thick quadruple sheet rock ceiling hanging from specially designed sound-isolating springs. Basically, I built a bunker-like room within a room before putting the finishing layers over it.

One thing I did do at the time was hire a professional engineer to sign off that the load I was putting on the floor was safe. It turned out that, because the building was built for newspaper printing presses, it can support more than two hundred pounds per square foot, so the sign-off was no problem.

When I first arrived at my 12th Street loft,[9] the conditions I moved into were horrendous. There was a ton of water damage from a rooftop sprinkler tank flood, and plaster and toxic paint was dropping from the ceilings and pillars everywhere. All the floors had been torn up by the fork lifts that were used to move the cases of toiletries that were stored there well before I came along. There were literally no floorboards whatsoever. The loft hadn't been rented for many years because it was such a mess. So I basically moved into an abandoned, heavily damaged warehouse that looked like a bomb had exploded in it, and transformed it entirely using heavy-duty sound studio construction techniques throughout. And I lived in the place throughout the entire two-year construction process.

Dziedzic: How did you decide that you wanted to open a studio for use by other musicians?

Mason: Well, that wasn't my original intention; I was creating a studio to use for my own work, but I got carried away. I always throw myself into any project that I undertake to the maximum extent I can. So, having worked in most of the seminal recording studios at the time, places like Electric Lady—I actually was there at the opening of Electric Lady Studios. I was the electronic

[9] The following section about the condition of Mason's 12th Street loft was conveyed to the interviewer by Mr. Mason in subsequent conversation.

music guy in the control room with my synthesizer setup on opening day (that was a great party). I studied Electric Lady's architecture while I was there. I also carefully examined The Record Plant when I was recording in Studio A there. I was even over at Apostolic Studios around the corner. I also studied one or two other studios, like Blue Rock. I would take a little from here, and borrow a little more from there, and created my own architectural synthesis. I had a lot of wonderful help from friends, but basically, I had to do the best job I could with what I could cobble together. I also have to credit architect Barry Silberstang for his contribution. I knew him from my college days when he was a student at Cooper Union with my best friend Eli Goitein at the time.

When I was finished, people came up and saw all this and immediately started wanting to record here. But I had never intended to go into such a career. At first I thought I could just fill in a little here and there, to outside clients, to pay some of the expenses. But when the word got out about the place—they talk about how opportunity knocks, you know? It was more like opportunity knocking and putting its fist right through my door. So I was off to the races before I knew it. I quickly upgraded my equipment to the most state-of-the-art equipment available that was the best of its kind at the time. And before I knew it, I had Billy Joel and Paul Simon up here with the King of All Record Producers, Phil Ramone, who was known as the "Pope of Pop." I had abruptly catapulted myself into the highest reaches of the recording world. And more or less stayed there ever since, give or take all the ups and downs of it all along the way.

I found that operating a state-of-the-art recording studio used a different set of brain cells than those one uses being a contemporary composer. [01:15:15] It became something of a crisis for me; when I finally turned 40, I wondered, how am I going to ever achieve what I thought was my creative manifest destiny? I had this wonderful, successful operation going on that totally reflected my creative energy from the ground up, and in the sound itself. The successful business dynamic proved to be irresistible, so I found that I had to go with that flow. I just went for it.

As I proceeded, I worked hard to create a sound that people came back for time and again. I had built up one of the largest collections of old tube microphones in the world. I had two of everything, pairs of everything; I invested heavily in that technology. And I owned a classic Neve (English) 8068 console that I purchased new in 1979 (with an equipment lease at sixteen percent, which was the highest interest rate in the last forty years—crazy high—and I still managed to pay it off in four years). I had all the classic analog outboard gear, and a slew of

Studer 800 series tape machines, the best series they ever made. I hired the best craftsmen I could find to restore and upgrade my microphones and equipment as I went along, so it sounded different and better than the same microphones and equipment anywhere else. For example, my Telefunken 251 tube microphone had a one-micron diaphragm instead of three-microns thick. I was the only one in town with that particular diaphragm. It still had all the warmth and fullness of the original, but also had a high end that went on forever. The purists, of course, hated that. But other people thought it was extraordinary. I did that sort of thing with all my equipment up and down the line. I put my creative energy into that.

In that way, the sound of the studio became, I think, something of a destination for industry producers and engineers. I was competing with much bigger studios that had multiple rooms, and that level of clientele was such that it was very difficult if you couldn't accommodate people when they were ready to record at almost a moment's notice. For example, Electric Lady had three or four recording rooms. If a recording artist who came back from a tour landed at the airport, and felt a sudden inspiration to go straight into the studio, Electric Lady could always accommodate them. They could be put in Studio B or C or D, if Studio A wasn't available. I had no Studio B, C, or D; I had just Studio A. I found myself constantly frustrated by that, so I had to become something of a master of juggling people around, which was sometimes not the most popular thing to do. But I knew after a while that, for better or for worse, at least in a business sense, my studio was going to be my best shot in life. So I did what I had to do.

By the time 2004 rolled around, the record industry had been decimated by internet piracy, and the recording studios in Manhattan, at least, were disappearing because of real estate pressures, and again, anybody who owned a computer could record on it almost as well as in a professional studio. All they needed was a good microphone and an isolation booth somewhere. And a talented engineer, which of course is always necessary.

But the Village was still in its heyday. Even then, my studio was still going strong. Many of my clients, people like Tom Waits, and John Zorn, and İlhan [Erşahin] were local practitioners. Also, the thing about musicians is they are basically homebodies. Even an artist with the stature of David Bowie, for example, tends to choose their studio according to which is the closest to their home or where they happen to be living at the moment. (He only came to RPM a few times because it was too far from his SoHo apartment; he wound up becoming a regular at The (excellent) Magic Shop mainly because of its geographic propinquity to his

home.) The question for many recording artists is, which studio would involve the least number of footsteps for them to get to every day? When I recorded two albums with the Beastie Boys, it didn't hurt that Mike Diamond happened to live right next door at the time. He just wanted to fall out of bed, take a few steps, and then be in the studio. (Of course, the studio has to be totally up to par too.) So that's why being located in a place like Greenwich Village was so important. Because creative people, at least at the time I was operating, were still being drawn to live in this part of the city. And the romance of the big studio was still alive, and the city itself was still growing. I think the city will continue to do that. I've seen New York re-invent itself three or four times already and it will eventually do that again. But it isn't a straight line.

Dziedzic: Can you talk a little bit more about the sound of your studio, and what it offered to an artist that was different from other kinds of studio environments?

Mason: Well, again, I did a lot of modifications to the classic analog gear. There has always been a competition between analog and digital in the world of sound. Of course, digital always was going to win because the economics of it all dictated that. But I found myself being the standard bearer for analog, mainly because that's where I had first established myself, but also because I found that if I upgraded, and fanatically took care of my equipment, analog could be superior to digital. I had a tremendous amount of antique gear, like having many vintage Bugatti race cars that needed to be kept in the kind of condition where they could still compete in the Grand Prix. That was an ongoing challenge.

So while I was doing that, I was also improving the specifications. I was also making the signal-to-noise ratio greater and improving the frequency response. And again, the purists would say, "How can you destroy that beautiful high-end roll-off? And I'd say, "Well, I don't know, I think it sounds better to hear the frequencies that are there." The purists are always standing in the way of innovation.

I heavily modified and upgraded my classic Neve console (Rupert Neve, N-E-V-E—he's still alive and making consoles to this day). There's a theory of sound that posits that although people technically cannot hear over eighteen thousand cycles (more like fifteen or sixteen thousand for most of us), we still hear the artifacts of frequencies all the way up into the fifties. Fifty thousand cycles, or up to fifty-four thousand cycles per second. We don't hear the fundamental tone, but we hear are the artifacts of the harmonics. And we're not even aware of

these harmonic artifacts the same way we hear sound in the audio range, but those artifacts are what we hear when we know we're hearing something that's a live instrument. That's what makes an instrument sound live, the high-end artifact stuff. So with my classic Neve console, I had the frequency response extended, and when engineers like Geoff Emerick from England (who are Neve experts) came by, they confirmed it by saying, "Yeah, you've nailed it!" Anyone could see these harmonic artifacts visually on an oscilloscope, but there are people like Geoff who have golden ears that can clearly hear and identify them. Again, no one can actually hear a 50,000+ cycle fundamental, but one can hear its artifacts if you know what to listen for. And you can sense them anyway, even if you don't know what you're hearing. Anyway, I was always very much at work modifying and hot-rodding my gear for that sort of result.

Also, the ambience of the studio complex was also important because I was able to create a beautiful double-wide space that was open to the sky, where I had oversized industrial windows that had unobstructed views across Union Square. I filled the space with all sorts of plants and trees, and I designed and built series of sunken living spaces (they used to be called "conversation pits") and places where people could gather, that seemed to go on and on. It was a very airy space that conveyed an uplifting, inspirational feeling.

Ironically, there are certain types of personalities that don't like that kind of working environment. Those people prefer a studio where there are no windows, where they kind of enter their own time zone, and are not reminded by what time of day it is. That was an issue when the Rolling Stones were here for months. When the sun would come up, they were like vampires, crying, "Oh my God, here comes the sun!" So I found myself having to put up blackout shades for them. Some people like to forget about the clock when they're in the studio. And there are other people who just prefer to work in an almost dungeon-like environment, you know? Work is work to some people. They don't want to work in a place that makes them feel like relaxing, and saying, "Ah, look at all this beautiful light and air, and all these beautiful trees." It's just too relaxing and calming for some people who need to be a little agitated to get anything done.

I did find, over the years, that the studio was popular with female artists. They really appreciated the natural environment. People like Natalie Merchant, Vanessa Williams, and Lauryn Hill, and many other wonderful women, came to my studio and were drawn to return time and again. Of course, who would mind that? So that was a part of the story. I created a wonderful environment that was like the Garden of Eden out there in the front. And then there

were the incredible interior studio rooms where there are no windows, where all was serene and soundproofed.

I created a very complex ceiling design in the studio room where most of the recording took place, where I designed a series of angled panels that created its own sound signature of reflected sound. And you can only get that sound signature in one place in the world—that room in my studio. That sound signature can be heard in a lot of recordings that were made up here. The actual studio had four isolation booths, where everybody had unobstructed sight lines so they could see one another easily while playing. I also created a similar ceiling design in the control room, but also worked on the control room acoustics a lot with the professionals, which is very important. With a certain amount of trial and error (actually there were plenty of errors at the beginning that were quickly corrected), it was finally established as a classic and accurate control room. All the rooms combined together to create a classic recording environment, one that, I believe, deeply resonated with people.

But it was all about the sound. The proof of the pudding was in the eating—the sound was there. And the inspiration was there. People would come from all over the world, and they'd say, "Ah, yes. This is a classic New York studio." The Japanese folks—I had a Japanese client base that would fly all the way from Tokyo just to be at RPM. And they were also carried away with the romance of New York. I had an extended period where the studio recorded and mixed a lot of salsa, and Cuban music, which was wonderful. The studio would a had all sorts of runs of certain musical styles at different times over the years. [01:29:59]

Most of the people who kept coming back, interestingly, came back because they loved the studio as a quality product. One such repeat client was engineer Jon Fausty. He was ultimately hired by Juan and Fidel Castro to build a studio for them and the Cuban Ministry of Culture in Havana. He went down there many times, and he built a State-owned studio for Cuban music in Havana—what's the name of it again? I can't remember [Abdala Studios]. I believe he borrowed a few design elements from my studio, which of course I don't mind at all.

I was fortunate to have the opportunity to travel independently to Cuba about five years ago. It was back when you could still go, just before it seemed to be opening up with [the presidency of Barack] Obama. It was a brief moment where it seemed like relations were thawing, but still I had to go through one of those special State Department visas, because back then, Americans couldn't go to Cuba independently, only certain tour groups were allowed to go

there. I told them that I was going as a professional and they granted me a special visa for that. When I got there, I made it my business to go to that studio, that Jon built, several times. I was greeted almost like a long-lost hero, "Oh, yes! Come in!" And I got a grand tour and sat in on some sessions, and I pointed out that they were storing their microphones incorrectly. So I did a little consulting and I saw certain elements of my studio replicated. It was very fulfilling. When I was there in Cuba, I discovered that the government had difficulty producing enough food and manufactured goods for their own people. The only product they had plenty of was their world-renowned music. And they knew it. That's why they built that studio, and I believe the Ministry of Culture still uses it to this day.

When we were down there, I was lucky to discover some very amazing musicians working off the radar down there (they are called "Interactivo"), and I was able to ferret that out, and experience some wonderful all-night shows with them in a funky basement club called the Bertolt Brecht Café Teatro. If you ever get to Havana—go there! Shows start at 1 AM. Anyway, a lot of these remarkably creative folks get out of there when they can. But they are replaced with ever more inspired young performers. The Cuban people are terrific, and Cuban culture is extraordinary. It's definitely something to experience in this lifetime.

So I had a lot of that going on. I had my reggae people, too, in the studio, like Burning Spear, and early on, even Bob Marley was there. It was a bit like being a ringmaster in a three-ring cultural circus that was going day and night. I'd have something different coming in all the time. And then we'd have clients coming in day after day for weeks and occasionally months on end, which of course was preferred.

Dziedzic: Are there any stories of working with artists that are maybe the best experiences for you, or stories that you find yourself coming back to?

Mason: Well, the things that stand out are, of course, the most high-profile. Someone like Phil Ramone, who at the time was one of the most brilliant producers and engineers in the world. The Academy actually invented a new Grammy award just for him (Producer of the Year) that he received while working at the studio. At the time, while he was here, he moved his operation in, lock, stock, and barrel. He put in his own telephone lines, and before you know it, I was abruptly at the pinnacle of music and recording—very suddenly. Those days were very intense and wild.

I quickly learned that when someone like Billy Joel records in a studio, his entire entourage shows up with him. So every day, I had endless people coming and going. And Phil was such a genius. He re-designed some of the studio fixtures, and I had them re-built according to his specifications. That was over a two-year-plus period. It was rather astonishing. I had just recently opened for business and within two years of completing construction, I was suddenly at the top of the game. It was almost too much too soon. [01:34:56]

Before you know it, there was another stand-out experience. I was able to convince the Rolling Stones, through their engineer, Dave Jerden, who had already worked in my studio, to come back. He was stuck in a control room in a Paris studio surrounded by Frenchmen at the time and was so happy to hear my American voice on the phone that he decided to advise them to come work here for the better part of a year. And that was really a party every night. Things fell into the following daily routine: the engineers came in every day around six o'clock in the evening, and they got some editing and housekeeping done in the control room for a few hours. And then around eleven or twelve o'clock, people would start turning up in earnest—many musicians and all the hangers-on from all over the city, and they would start jamming. And before you know it, by one or two o'clock in the morning, I had a full-blown celebration going on. People were everywhere, all over the place. And I was ordering their favorite alcohol for them, which was called Rebel Yell, an esoteric bourbon, for the party going on nearly every night. Everybody who happened to be in town would show up.

At that time, it was the summer when the first Live Aid concert was presented in Philadelphia. People were flying into New York on their way to perform there, and they were drawn to the scene in the studio first. For example, when Led Zeppelin chaotically reunited onstage at that Live Aid Festival, they actually reunited at my studio first, during one of those sprawling jam sessions, before they headed off to the Festival. So those Stones sessions superimposed a de facto staging ground for the first Live Aid Festival on top of everything else that was going on.

Then, finally, at around four o'clock in the morning, Mick, and Keith, and the other principal players (Charlie and Woody)—the band itself—would start to appear. They were the kind of band who would only record as a band, together as a unit. They wouldn't record in an overdubbing fashion, except for Mick's vocals, which later on went on forever, overdubbing almost syllable by syllable. But the band would only play together as a unit. Their first take was

at around six o' clock in the morning. Then, after the scenesters had thinned out, they would work a few hours until eight or nine o'clock in the morning, and then they'd all leave to basically get to sleep somewhere probably by noon. They lived on the other side of the clock. So I lived that life with them for about a year.

But there were lots of other wonderful sessions. Remarkable people working up here that are hard to forget. I don't even mention this much, but we worked on the soundtrack of a movie called *Analyze That*. Are you familiar with it? The soundtrack was created by a wildman DJ by the name of David Holmes, who was able to pull together multiple strands and a brilliant hodgepodge of musicians to create his delightful work for that picture.

Dziedzic: I wanted to ask about Arthur Russell.

Mason: Arthur Russell was wonderful to work with. It was in the '90s, and he was just one of the most creative people I've ever met in my life. The thing I remember about him is that he brought all his art supplies with him. He brought tons of paint, and canvases, and big pieces of drawing paper with him. He was basically painting away in the front of the loft during the entire time he was recording here because he just loved the light. I've got beautiful north light here in the front. At the time, he was probably living in that East Village Allen Ginsburg building, a short distance away in a tiny apartment. I think he was here for the light and the space as much as the studio. But this was a guy for whom everything—his music and his visual art—was always pouring out of him. One image after another and one song after another. [01:40:01] I didn't really appreciate him as much at the time as I do now. What a beautiful tone and distinctive voice he had. He was brilliant, an absolutely brilliant light. He was gone too soon. One of the advantages of being in this Village neighborhood was an artist like him could just walk over here from East Seventh Street, or Sixth Street. What street was that? I think it was East Eleventh or Twelfth? It was almost right down the block, you know? Anyway, he was truly astonishing.

I was also fortunate to work with Laurie Anderson on probably one of her more remarkable albums. She had recently released her surprise hit, "O Superman," a single. I was friends with her producer, and I knew all those people a bit from my earlier days. But she worked a lot with a producer and bass player named Bill Laswell. Have you heard of that name, Bill Laswell? He had a production company with Roger Trilling and Eric Beinhorn called Material,

and they recorded many projects here too, like Nona Hendryx's *Design for Living*, and Afrika Bambaataa and Herbie Hancock's *Future Shock*. They produced Laurie Anderson's album called *Mister Heartbreak* here, which I think is one of her very best early works. At the time, I introduced engineer Bob Musso to Bill Laswell and now nearly forty years later Bob is still his principal engineer.

For me, having Laurie up here creating that *Mister Heartbreak* album was a wonderful time—it was a magical moment. And a lot of different artists converged and collaborated on it up here, which is kind of what it's all about: collaboration. And you find that when you get a group of strong personalities converging at a certain stage in their lives and careers, and at a certain stage in the cultural history—it's a moment that can never happen again. It's already happened. I was lucky to have it continue to happen over and over again right here in this environment I had created.

One of the more wonderful moments was when we had Dr. John here recording and mixing an entire album of Duke Ellington songs, of all things. He managed to infuse his New Orleans cultural ethos with that of Duke Ellington's music, and create a unique blend almost just by playing it. And he was a lovely man to have around. I remember, in this case, he wanted the tracks to be recorded only using one of my assistants and no engineer. She just recorded everything straight and perfectly dry. No EQ, no reverb, no nothing, just super-dry raw tracks. But very well recorded. And then he brought in a mixer who was a real ringer. His name was—is, he's still with us, I'm sure—Ray Bardini—and he utterly transformed those raw tracks into an amazingly perfect product. How did he do that? He took the rawest of ingredients and baked them into a magical confection, like a true miracle worker [01:44:54]

It just shows how specialized the fields become. I mean, mixers really are artists unto themselves. The recording process itself is another thing—just recording a set of drums properly is another art form unto itself. One has to learn how to use a room properly, and get those long wavelengths captured on the other side of the room, and watch out for the reflections, as well as use all those microphones properly.

There was a time when a group called Spin Doctors was a big success. That's the closest thing we ever had to a real homegrown band at the studio because each member of the band actually worked for me in the studio, mostly in some silly capacity, usually at the desk, or an assistant or whatever—as a gopher, or an intern, even. They kind of coalesced around the studio,

and made some demos, landed a major label record contract, and made their first breakthrough album here (following in the footsteps of the many other first breakthrough albums created at RPM). But actually having your very own successful homegrown band was special.

You know, when I built this studio, this is how I actually got it done—this is very apropos of Greenwich Village. I was talking before about a publication called *The Village Voice*, which I'm sure you're aware of. It's still online a little bit, isn't it? I don't know, I think they finally closed it. But there was a time when *The Village Voice* was the main publication for the downtown community. It came out every Wednesday, and people would line up at Sheridan Square early Wednesday morning to get it hot off the press (mostly to look for apartments). I placed classified ads in it asking musicians to trade their construction skills for future studio time. Then I drafted a stack of contracts, and everybody signed theirs dutifully. I wish I could still find them, but at a certain point, when you're in the same place for decades, you get into throwing stuff away before you find yourself buried in your own papers and detritus. I think I threw all those old contracts away, which is a shame because I think they would be so charming now.

Anyway, I conscientiously kept track of all the construction time that each musician/worker put in, and how many hours of studio time I owed each and every one of them. And those musician/construction workers really did a tremendous amount of work for me. They really saved my project. And some of the work they did was terrific. At the end of the day, though, I did have to hire an actual professional contractor (who was actually a musician himself) to finish the project, and also traded two hundred hours of studio time, and pay him a significant amount on top of that to finish the damn thing, but he did make it happen. His name was Joe Dick, and his brother Bill Dick operated the Lone Star Cafe around the corner, which for a time was one of the best live music clubs in the city with whom RPM developed a somewhat symbiotic relationship with for a while.

Dziedzic: And is this the original construction?

Mason: This was in the mid-to-late '70s. But ironically, not one of those musicians who worked for future studio time ever came back to redeem their contract. Not one of them. And I was ready to make good on all of it—it would have been no problem. Even though everyone basically worked for free, not one of them came back to use the time I owed them. Except for the

contractor, who had formed his own production company and came back with Marshall Crenshaw, who was something like fifteen years old at the time. Even at that age he was clearly exceptional and already obviously a star. [01:49:59] So they got him into the studio, and spent their two hundred hours there, and maybe a little more, and from those recordings he snagged a major record deal with Warner Brothers, and the rest is history. That was the only redemption of future studio time—it was the contractor who was the only one who had it together enough to actually claim his time.

PORTION OMITTED

Mason: So what is interesting is that right from the beginning, the spirit that built RPM was one where people were really building it for their own creativity. They all intended to come back in here to create something of their own when the studio was finally open. And, again, I was ready to make good on every single one of those contracts, but no one except the final contractor even asked, and they all knew where to find me. Anyway, these are the things that pop up in your mind when you're reminiscing.

Dziedzic: I wanted to ask about the factors that led to the close of your studio.

Mason: Well, again, it was getting more and more difficult to stay in the business because the industry was slowly sinking basically due to technological obsolescence. Big studios were no longer needed to make decent recordings. Again, anyone with a computer could make a passable recording as long as a good engineer was involved. And the budgets from the record companies were drying up because of early internet piracy of the record industry. Do you remember Napster? I don't know if you would remember it, you're too young—

Dziedzic: It was when I was in college, actually.

Mason: Those were the early days of it and they created a whole new generation of consumers who just didn't want to pay for recorded music. They figured it's just not something you buy. They simply don't want to spend money on it—although, of course, there's been something of a comeback with vinyl and subscription services, but that's the exception to the rule. But operating the studio got to be, by the early 2000s, like trying to get blood out of the stone. It was just getting too hard. And then an opportunity came along. Remember, because I had gathered an

extraordinary collection of equipment that included a pair of every microphone known to man. Actually, people used to call it the "The Noah's Ark of Microphone Collections," because I had two of everything, as I said earlier. And I had pairs of every piece of analog gear that you could possibly think of too.

Around that time—I could see the end of the recording industry in Manhattan on the horizon well before I actually closed my studio—I was working on a transition several years before the end of that chapter. I had a buyer who I had cultivated long-term while still in operation, and this is what happened. I was told that there's a man in Nevada who at that time owned the patent for an algorithm that was used on every slot machine in the state of Nevada. This algorithm knew how to give back just enough money to the customer to keep them feeding more money into the machine so that the house would always win. That patent he owned paid him something like a penny or two every time that one-armed band came down. [01:55:03] So he was some kind of Nevada billionaire.

This man had a nephew who was somewhat at loose ends. So he decided to set his nephew up in a studio business, and gave his him a few million dollars to go out and buy a lot of equipment and assemble a multi-room studio on the Vegas Strip, where I believe they were planning to put a shark tank in the middle of it all. There were going to be eight different rooms. Most of the rooms were going to be digital editing and mix suites, but they planned on one special room in a corner of the complex that was going to dedicated to recording "real music." It was going to be made out of wood, and be a place where "real musicians" could come in with "real wood instruments," and use "real vintage microphones," and "real vintage analog gear," and a classic analog console, to create the warmth and the fullness of analog recording. So the nephew acquired my entire collection in full, and took some of my plans, and went out there and, like they do in Vegas, replicated everything, and it's all being used to this day. So I like to say that the studio isn't really gone, it's just retired to Vegas and does three shows a night at Caesar's Palace—of course, I'm just kidding. But at least most of my original, lovingly assembled collection is still all together and in use out there to this day.

As a matter of fact, I recently read an article in a trade magazine where the new owners decided to "restore" all the microphones they acquired from me. What that means is that they're going to remove all those special diaphragms I had installed and put back the thick diaphragms, basically undoing the work I so carefully did. So the purists have won. But that's ok. The main

thing is these classic microphones are still highly prized totems. Indeed, having a collection like that was my pride and joy. And we used them on a daily basis. It wasn't just having a collection for the sake of having a collection. But you could almost admire them as sculpture after a while. In fact, people became obsessed with those microphones. Some of them are really big, sometimes like fourteen inches or sixteen inches long. Sometimes I would refinish their bodies with a mirrored finish and make them visually dazzling. But then some the purists would say "Oh, no! We want that seventy-year-old German paint job!" or whatever.

Dziedzic: They want the patina. [laughs]

Mason: Exactly. The antique patina. So there's that school of thought that I believe is also a form of irrational ancestor worship. I think the original designers of these microphones might have been the first ones to say, "Go ahead! We couldn't make the diaphragms less than three microns thick. If you know how to make them one micron thick, go ahead and do it. We would have done it ourselves if we could have mass-produced it at the time." On the other hand, the three-micron thick diaphragms do have a special sound. There used to be another group of purists who thought that reverberation can only be properly obtained by a pair of speakers in a physical room that has reflective walls, and a pair of microphones, that picked up the actual physical reverberation acoustically (the old-fashioned way).

To cope with that, a long time ago a German company called EMT came up with a unit called the 140 (or EMT 140), which was simply a highly engineered steel plate suspended by special springs, surrounded by a kind of long, eight-by-four box. I had three of those German plates, in a closet, which is still off my kitchen here. The problem with them was that they were very sensitive. So I put them on isolators, so that when I would walk down an adjacent hallway, my footsteps wouldn't come into the recording. But one time while Phil Ramone was mixing the *Live in Central Park* recording by Simon and Garfunkel in the control room, I was talking in my kitchen, [02:00:19] and my voice bled into the mix through those EMT plates. Phil stopped everything and said "What is that?" So it got, shall we say, a little too close to home sometimes. But that only happened once. After installing some additional soundproofing it never happened again.

I was really the first one to create a studio on the highest level in a live-work loft, with a living space. Perhaps another first. That was totally unheard of at the time. I was misunderstood,

to an extent, by the people in the studio because it was so unheard of. After a while, I found that it was better if I just didn't tell people where I lived. If you ever see the layout up here, you'll see I had it set up so that I just could disappear into the southern end of the loft, which had a wonderful view, unobstructed, over the Greenwich Village Historic District to the World Trade Center, and the entire southern Manhattan skyline. The glorious sun from the southern exposure floods in here all day. And I have a private door in my entry vestibule so I can just slip into the back without being noticed by clients if I wasn't in the mood. I found that it's much more professional if people don't know where you live. When I was younger, I would sort of be proud of living so close, and over time I found it better to keep it more under wraps. People find out anyway. Fortunately, there was always enough space to not ever feel like I was living on top of the store.

Dziedzic: And when you and I were talking earlier, you mentioned that the phase that you're in currently is what you call the after-party. So I just wondered if you could expand a little bit about what you've done since closing the chapter of the studio.

Mason: Indeed, I call it the after-party, but that's obviously in jest. It is true that post-studio life has been a time of liberation for me. I had a chance to do some extensive traveling abroad that I never had enough time to do before. As I always do, I threw my creative energy into crafting some extraordinary far-flung itineraries all over the world. I could tell you many tales about our travels all over the world—but perhaps another time. The highlight, though, is that we fell in love with Bali and Indonesia, which is one of the most remarkable, longest-running, continuous cultures on the planet. Bali is a Mecca for creative people who flock there from all over the world to realize their visions. And the Balinese people are all artists themselves, who have organized their lives and their culture so they could work during the mornings in their rice fields and terraces to sustain themselves, and then spend the rest of the day being artists, dancers, musicians, and sculptors—you name it. So the island is literally bristling with creativity as well as being a Hindu-animist tropical paradise (with spectacular international cuisine). And Indonesia is a country where dozens of civilizations have come and gone for thousands of years––it's like another planet super-imposed on this planet. It's called "The Majapahit." Newly discovered cave paintings on Sulawesi go back 73,000 years and are far older than any in Europe.

Going to that part of the world was always a way for us to get as far away from New York City and America as possible, to change my perspective as much as possible on multiple levels. We needed that distance to balance out the depth and intensity of experience we've always had right here in New York for such a long time. But we always return home to our loft here at 12 East 12th Street where we have consistently spent the vast majority of our time every year for the past forty-five years. This loft has always been and will always be our only home, with Greenwich Village always being our terra firma, so to speak. This is especially important to us in this current moment of profound societal instability.

At the same time we were traveling, I also threw myself into going through this loft doing extensive cosmetic upgrades. After spending years pouring my resources into my studio, I finally had a chance to put some of my energy into our home. I spent a lot of time and resources with that (as I always do with any project I tackle). I'm pleased with the results. After all those years focusing on my studio, I realized my wife and I had been living basically almost like undergraduate students. We didn't have any decent furniture or artwork on the walls—we basically had nothing but a crumbling loft that was returning to the earth. So I made up for lost time, big-time. The place is beautiful and sparkling now, filled with contemporary Italian furniture and primitive and contemporary art from Indonesian and African that we've been collecting along the way.[10]

PORTION OMITTED

Mason: In the last few years, I've become more aware of the new contemporary classical scene. There's a new generation coming up, some of whom are focused here in New York, and Brooklyn. And there's a whole new world of post-genre contemporary classical electronic music. I sent you a link about it so you can listen to it—*New Sounds* on WNYC/NPR/WQXR. I'm enthralled by this work, and am embarking on a project experimenting with commissioning young composers (well, composers younger than me, which makes them middle-aged composers now—time marches on), and I would love perhaps to make a series of compilation albums that include these commissions; here I am, making records again. But actually, it's not a business at

[10] Photographs of the Masons' loft are included at the end of this interview transcript.

all this time. There is absolutely zero profit in it—in a way, that's the whole point. It's non-profit all the way. It's all about giving back and possibly leaving some sort of legacy.

However, the pandemic has slowed down that project a bit. I was ready to start in early 2020, and then suddenly everyone and everything was stopped cold by the lockdown. So many of the younger composers and musicians, who were able to make a living performing and touring, have been decimated—it's so tough for them now. [02:10:02]

PORTION OMITTED

Mason: Anyway, this is what I'm excited about now. The work is just remarkable. I want to do whatever I can to encourage it.

PORTION OMITTED

Dziedzic: Are there any centers of performance, or people coming out of particular schools, or working in particular places, if not New York, that you are looking to right now, and interested to see? I guess, current circumstances aside [referring to the pandemic].

Mason: One of the things I noticed in my travels was that there's an international circuit for this sort of thing. If you're in Berlin, you'll find that more or less the same performers are traveling to more or less the same places. (Of course, that was when people were still traveling.) So there's sort of a de facto post-genre contemporary classical music circuit, and there are venues in the major western European cities, and in Australia, in Melbourne, and I guess in Tokyo. Now, there are other centers, though, that are unique and wonderful, and I would like to visit sometime soon. For example, I've never been to Iceland, but there is something in the water there, musically, I think. There's a group of brilliant composers and musicians called The Bedroom Community doing wonderful things in Reykjavik, which I can only hope I can visit someday—and intend to visit as soon as I can travel again.

Dziedzic: Do you think that Greenwich Village is still a magic land when it comes to music production?

Mason: I don't know. For me, it always will be. I am not aware of too many young creative people who can come and live in Greenwich Village these days. If anything, that spirit has been scattered all over the place now, to Brooklyn and way beyond. So much of it has become virtual

now, anyway. There is only a remnant of my generation left in Manhattan. I guess I'm one of the last of my kind at this point. Some of the original people are still in their lofts, but there are just a few of us left. But the younger generations [02:15:04] can't come here so easily any more, although I do hear that the Manhattan rents are dropping at least at this moment, so hopefully all that may be changing now, which would be a good thing.

PORTION OMITTED

Mason: I would love to see a regeneration of the Village as a sort of silver lining to the pandemic. We'll see, to be continued indeed.

Dziedzic: Yes. Well, I think we're at the end of the things that I had made notes to talk about, but I want to ask if there's anything that we didn't discuss that you would like to add.

Mason: The only additional thing I would like to say[11] is it will be a privilege to participate again and give back to the next generation in new music. That's what I'm trying to do in a pro-active way. I will not only be commissioning new music from these post-genre contemporary classical electronic composers, but also commissioning the sound recordings of their work combined with one or two acoustic instruments or vocalists. That's what electronic composers do: they create recordings, as I explained to you earlier. As part of these small electroacoustic commissions, they will also be providing me with the "stems," which are the individual instruments and effects on separate tracks. They will just Dropbox all their work to me—and that, I think, is true 21st-century commissioning. Then I intend to spatially remix the stems privately on my personal, modern multi-channel ribbon speaker system, made in Berlin by Adam Audio, much in the same way I did when I was working with my multi-channel Soundmurals project in the early '80s, when I installed those Soundmurals systems using my own custom-built ribbon speakers, playing my electronic music in the MoMA sculpture garden, The Guggenheim Museum, and at the Griswold Art Museum in Newport, Rhode Island. Except this time, I will be able to use Surround 7.1 and Logic Pro software, which will be much easier than inventing my

[11] The following section about forthcoming commissions and the Soundmurals project in the 1980s was conveyed to the interviewer by Mr. Mason in subsequent conversation.

own multi-channel playback system again, as I had to do in the ‘80s. Technology marches on and it’s great.

Spatial remixing the stems (separate tracks) of the recordings I am commissioning is a way for me, as the commissioner, to deeply engage with these new works that I will be bringing into the world, almost as an extension of my art collection. Again, this is 21st-century commissioning: a way of collecting commissioned recordings that I will be privately transforming into what could be described as spatial sound sculptures. However, unlike the usual ambient random sound sculpture, or so-called sound art, I’m commissioning serious post-genre classical electronic composers to create complex works that develop very specifically and intricately over time. It will not be anything like the overly-static ambient music that’s out there (although there’s definitely a time and place for that sort of thing). In this way, I will be getting back to the electronic-music-as-object concept I told you about earlier that I started my career with, almost coming full circle.

I should say that this spatial remixing will be strictly for my own private edification and serious play, and definitely not for public consumption. The scores, the recordings, and the live performances are what will become public from this project. In any case, to me, part of the joy of doing all this is to get to interact a little with the composers and perhaps have them know, if they’re interested, that I was one of the first post-genre contemporary classical electronic composers myself, and pay it forward to them a bit.

Today’s new music scene is a far more collegial and inclusive world than it used to be, and I want to be a part of that sprawling community because it represents a whole new ethos that’s absolutely wonderful.[12]

SIDE CONVERSATION

Dziedzic: And I know it’s difficult to think about the future, and all our future intentions, but thank you for talking about what you would like to be able to do, and I hope that you will be able to do it.

Mason: Well, thank you. Thank you so much.

[12] Additional information about Mason’s career and commissioning project are available on the Facebook page @StardriveWithRobertMason

SIDE CONVERSATION

Dziedzic: Take care. Bye-bye.

END OF RECORDING

Front room (top) and back room (bottom), 2020 (see Mason p. 43), Photos by Robert Mason