


[deutsche seite](#)

[Media](#)
[News Archives](#)
[Events](#)
[Artists](#)
[Imprint](#)

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Interview with Michael Brecker

Q: You're well known for your interest in technology. What does the technology mean for you as a musician?

Michael Brecker: On a music level, technology doesn't mean anything unto itself. Dependent on whoever is using it, it can become a very powerful tool. For me, it has been, in many ways, a great aid in various aspects of creating music.

Q: You're well known as a saxophone player and appear in so many liner notes of various productions. What lead you to form your own great ensemble instead of standing alone in small studio booths? Were you tired of playing on other artists works?

Michael Brecker: I've been recording and touring with my own small groups since the mid eighties. I didn't have a desire for large ensemble in mind for years, or anything like that. I happened to do a tour in England two years ago with a similar large ensemble, and enjoyed it so much that I decided to go home and write new material for this instrumentation, and arrange it with the help of Gil Goldstein, my close friend and colleague.

Q: What does the ensemble consist of?

Michael Brecker: It's four strings, three woodwinds and three brass, with a rhythm section. I enjoyed having the ability to incorporate a lot of colors that I normally wouldn't have been able to use.

Q: Were there any surprises for you, once able to express your musical ideas with the new possibilities afforded by the ensemble?

Michael Brecker: Certainly, it was a new medium for me, and I generally like to try new things. That keeps me pushing ahead. In this scenario, I found that the (ensemble) instrumentation had a kind of sonority that worked well with the sax.

Q: How did you approach writing and arranging these compositions?

Michael Brecker: I wrote them on piano and on the saxophone. Logic plays an important part in the arrangements, as once the parts are in Logic I manipulate them to the point where they sound good to my ear. I was able to do this both at home and while traveling. Logic goes with me everywhere on my laptop. So I work in the hotel room with a small keyboard, which gives me complete freedom. I also record into it, playing the saxophone in the hotel and at home. It works very well. I've

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been using Logic for many years now and I'm pretty fast at playing around with the data. For me, it's an invaluable tool.

Q: Were there any changes to the way you worked in Logic for a bigger ensemble, rather than solo pieces?

Michael Brecker: For me, it just meant adding more instruments. Everything else was the same. I'm used to writing in Logic, and have been doing this for years - pretty much since the early nineties. So it wasn't much of a stretch to write for a larger ensemble within Logic. It just made life easier for me. When I was finished with the tunes and the arrangements, I would then send Gil Goldstein a MIDI file, and he would then help with the orchestration or reorchestrate them, because my orchestrations, while not bad, aren't complete.

Q: One of the main technical questions surrounding arranging is how to emulate the ensemble that you're going to work with. How do you go about it?

Michael Brecker: I use orchestral instruments within the Logic environment, and there is certainly no lack of choices. There are so many sounds available now, which I primarily play through the EXS24. I'm not trying to make a record within Logic. I just want to hear a basic mockup or roadmap of how things are generally gonna sound.

Q: So Logic is your notepad for grabbing and jotting down ideas?

Michael Brecker: That's a good way to put it. It's a notepad. Normally, I'm able to capture an idea with it, and am able to really manipulate it and come up with various choices and approaches. It works very well for me.

Q: So intuition is the force that drives you forward when working with Logic - like it does on stage as well?

Michael Brecker: The beauty of playing live, improvised music is the potential to be spontaneous and interact with other creative musicians in realtime. As I said, I'm able to get around easily in Logic, so I use it intuitively. I also work quite a bit with my friend George Whitty. He produced a number of my records, and he's been using Logic for many years. Whenever I have questions, I call George. As a musician, I'm not an electrician, I'm not a computer programmer but I find the software tremendously intuitive and flexible. And I did want to get onto a technology related topic that's been exciting me quite a lot. I'm beginning to use the EWI (Electronic Wind Instrument) with laptop Logic system.

Q: So you're controlling the software instruments with the EWI?

Michael Brecker: Correct. And it is working very, very well.

Q: What software instruments do you use?

Michael Brecker: Well, the two that work best, and are most suited to the EWI, are the EXS24 and the ES2. Both have a great programmability and flexibility in regard to aftertouch, volume and breath control etc. - and being able to assign these controllers to filters. But it's not only that. The instruments look and sound incredible! Beyond this, more can be achieved in the environment. George Whitty designed an environment for me that incorporates the use of Logic's transformers in a very creative and useful way. Using transformers, the sky's the limit. You can do so many creative things. I believe that Logic is the only program that has this

ability. We're working on some really exciting technologies, using Logic as the springboard to make some very interesting things happen with the laptop. It's become an indispensable tool. It's the equivalent right now of having two or three large racks full of sound modules.

Q: You haven't played the EWI on stage for quite some time?

Michael Brecker: I had retired the EWI for a while because I was tired of lugging equipment around from city to city. Now it seems like I'm going to be able to do it again, as I have all the racks inside the laptop.

Q: So the EWI seems to have undergone a renaissance, thanks to laptops?

Michael Brecker: Yes, absolutely. And it's fun too! It's always a very enjoyable instrument to play because it's tremendously expressive, now in a way, more expressive than ever.

Q: What future do you see in such controllers and sound generation on the computer?

Michael Brecker: Well I think things just keep progressing. You know, I certainly couldn't have done this even three years ago. The combination of a large drive, lots of memory and the faster speed of the micro processor has increased the creative possibilities of programs like Logic, which is exciting to me. I can enjoy using the software from both a composing and recording standpoint, and now as well, for performance.

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[Back to the Top](#)

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