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Maria Schneider

Maria Schneider was born in the small town of Windom, Minnesota, far from the jazz world in which she now lives. She received a Master's Degree in Jazz Composition from the Eastman School of Music and gained valuable experience in her associations with Bob Brookmeyer and Gil Evans. Her innovative writing for jazz ensembles has won great critical praise and her third album with the Maria Schneider Orchestra was recently nominated for a Grammy Award.

Maria was interviewed in New York City on January 12, 2001, by Monk Rowe, Director of the Fillius Jazz Archive at Hamilton College.

MR: My name is Monk Rowe and we are filming in New York for the Hamilton College Jazz Archive. I'm quite pleased to have Maria Schneider with me this afternoon. And I know you have been working both ends of your life — quite busy the last few days.

MS: Yeah, with the performance of my orchestra, and panels, and then just seeing everybody that you ever met in school or working overseas or in the States and from schools and things. So it's pretty crazy here.

MR: This Jazz Educator's conference is pretty astounding actually, when you think of how far it's come in the last few years.

MS: Yeah, it's gotten bigger and bigger. I just noticed the catalogue gets thicker.

MR: You are one of the few people I've talked to who really went all the way through with your education in music, through graduate work. I'm not sure how to ask this question but I'll try. In your writing, how much of it is attributable to your education and how much of it is inherent in you?

MS: That's an interesting question. I think that the biggest thing that school gives you, or gave me, I'll talk about me, the biggest thing that school gave me was an opportunity to focus on my music without the distractions of the other things in life. You know, this concentration of going to classes and just, your mind is always, in that period of your life, where I think those are really big years, when you're from 18 to maybe 24, 25, you can really absorb a lot of information. And I think the biggest thing was just the concentration of thinking about music all the time. Because I was in school, and being around other musicians, and having ensembles available to write for. I think that was the most important part of it. I think that the most important teachers I had were teachers that guided but didn't tell me what to do. And as far as jazz composition goes, when I did my undergrad at the University of Minnesota, there was no jazz program at that school. I also didn't have a jazz high school band or anything like that. I grew up, as a matter of fact, you know I'm from Minnesota, a very small town, and there was only one person in Windom that really knew anything about jazz, but she was an extraordinary stride player.

40 This is kind of going off on your question, but it kind of leads up, because my education
41 really started with her. And as I was learning classical pieces, she taught me how to play
42 in this old stride style. So we were learning standards and I would come up with my own
43 piano arrangements of them basically, with a little bit of improvisation. And I learned to
44 play out of a fake book. The thing is, she didn't tell me anything about the development
45 of jazz. So by the time — and there was no record store the only records I had were old
46 Ellington records from the 30s, Teddy Wilson, Artie Shaw — I didn't have any modern
47 jazz records. And public T.V. and public radio wasn't so big back then. I had a lot of
48 classical music, but I was really, I always felt sad because I felt that I grew up in the
49 wrong era, that if I had grown up with — Mrs. Butler did, because she had come from
50 Chicago, and she only moved to Windom because her son and her husband had both died
51 within a month of each other, her only family left was in Windom. So that's the only
52 reason there was this genius personality in Windom. But I thought that jazz had died and
53 I felt really sad that I grew up in the wrong era, because I wanted to be part of that. So by
54 the time I went to college for music, I thought well maybe I'll study composition. But I
55 felt weird in the classical world. Because the classical world, in the universities
56 especially, even more so at that time, tonality was something that, if you wrote something
57 that was tonal, you were just shunned.

58 MR: Is that right? That's really weird.

59 MS: Well it's absolutely true. And I remember I wrote a piece for two pianos that was on a
60 sort of composer forum concert at the school or whatever. And there were people looking
61 at each other, because everybody was writing sort of atonal music and this thing was very
62 tonal and romantic. And I remember seeing two older composers looking at each other
63 and giggling. And I remember feeling, I just don't have a place in this world in this
64 music. And then I went to — two things happened at once. I went to a Bob Hope show,
65 of all things, and they were backed up by a big band from the college. This is right when
66 I started school, and I thought oh my God, there's a big band. And there was this kid
67 playing drums, and people improvising a little bit. And I was like, oh my God, I want to
68 — I had no idea this sort of thing existed. And then this guy who lived in the dorm down
69 the hall from me, he heard me playing some old Ellington album, and he said, "do you
70 like jazz?" And I said, "yeah, you know what that is?" And he said — well as it turned
71 out, I didn't know what it was, he knew what it was. He brought me all these records. He
72 brought me Herbie Hancock "Head Hunters," he brought me Coltrane, McCoy Tyner. I'd
73 never heard a piano player play without a root before. So suddenly I heard all this
74 modern jazz. And I'll tell you, I was like in tears, because it was like oh my God, the
75 dream came true that this music had evolved and I could be part of it. And so
76 immediately I just started trying to absorb everything I could. And I got through with that

77 classical degree as quickly as I could so that my last year of school all I did was work on
78 my own. I studied with Manfredo Fest, who is a Brazilian pianist that lived in
79 Minneapolis. He was blind but he taught me — all our lessons we just transcribed Bill
80 Evans by ear and it was amazing. And then I tried to write a few things for the big band,
81 and I learned on my own. And I learned from friends that I was in school with that were
82 playing. There was a guy named Dave Slutten who sadly just died, a young guy, but he
83 and I would get together and we'd go to our Manfredo lessons together and listen to each
84 other's lessons. And that was more val— so you could say okay I came through a
85 college, but my education in jazz came from the support of friends and just out of a love
86 of music and listening to things all the time. I heard this record, did you hear that? I
87 transcribed this, let me share it with you. That was the value of school. And then when I
88 wanted to go on and study further, then I applied to go to Eastman for grad school, and
89 Rayburn Wright, who also has since passed away sadly, he wrote me a letter back and
90 said, "Maria," he said, "we can't accept you, you don't—" He said, "but I really feel like
91 you have talent," he said, "I really recognize that, but you don't have any experience. So
92 why don't you come out to our summer session?" At this time they had this big
93 arranger's holiday, which was quite famous at the time and arrangers came from all over
94 the country. They put together a big band, a studio orchestra and you wrote your ass off
95 for three weeks, and then they would play your music and critique it. So I worked my
96 butt off to impress Ray and to learn. And I wrote my first studio orchestra piece, and I
97 quickly caught up. And I hadn't gotten into Eastman but I went to University of Miami
98 for a semester, and was around all these students that were doing so many modern things
99 and they were so great, and the band was so fantastic. They played my music, they
100 recorded a couple of things, I mean I went from like here to here overnight. And then
101 Eastman then allowed me to get in. And I wanted to go to Eastman because they have
102 people like Bill Dobbins, who really taught jazz from the historical point of view. And I
103 was missing everything from swing until today. And I really needed the roots of things.
104 And so Bill Dobbins, you know, we'd go through Charlie Parker solos note for note and
105 analyze everything. And I needed that. Because I was missing a lot. But as far as my own
106 voice, I found that. Nobody helped me with that.

107 MR: You are really self motivated.

108 MS: Self motivated, and also because I didn't have anybody really over my shoulder in those
109 beginning stages where I was experimenting, I came up with my own unorthodox ways
110 of doing things that I never dropped. And I remember Rayburn Wright in class, he used
111 to pull out my things as an example and say, "Maria broke every rule I taught you last
112 week here. But it works and this is why." And so that was nice, I mean not always was it

113 good, but every once in a while he would say that, and I appreciated that he recognized
114 that and allowed me to grow in those kind of unorthodox ways.

115 MR: Wow. Did you have a supportive family in this kind of decision?

116 MS: Absolutely. Yeah, thank God. I remember hearing my parents argue one night that — my
117 father was more practical than — well it's hard to say. But my mother really supported us
118 in the arts. I have two sisters, one is a painter now she's an architect, the other one did a
119 lot of Shakespearean acting and writing, now she became a lawyer. Everybody became
120 slightly more practical. And I did music. And I remember my father at one point just
121 panicked that his daughters were theater, art and music. And he said, "it's your fault,
122 you're the one who bought them all the books and the records and paintings" or
123 whatever. But they were always supportive. And they don't always understand
124 everything I do. Sometimes my mother says, "I want to hear something I can sing in the
125 shower." But they were supportive.

126 MR: Wow. That was a great answer actually.

127 MS: Well see that's what I mean. You just can't shut me up.

128 MR: Well when you get a commission to write — I'm just going to skip to this question
129 because after hearing some of your work the other night, I'm wondering — if you get a
130 commission to write something, do people usually give you guidelines? Like we are
131 looking for this kind of thing. And if they don't, where does your initial inspiration come
132 from?

133 MS: Well the first thing is, actually I don't like getting commissions. I know every composer
134 likes commissions, because it means you're being paid to write. But I put myself through
135 a psychological trip a little bit when I get a commission. Luckily people don't say to me
136 I'd like you to do something that's kind of this or that. If they do forget it. It's over. I
137 can't. I have had people commission me to write an arrangement of something, for
138 instance "Love Theme from Spartacus," the Danish Radio Orchestra, he came to me. But
139 then he didn't tell me how to do it. I knew I was doing that piece for Toots Thielmans. So
140 I took the elements of that song that I loved and I developed them, and the elements of
141 that song which I didn't love I skirted my way around. So generally the thing that I have
142 a problem is if somebody comes to me and says, "I want a drum feature for me," or, "I
143 want a piece that features me on flugelhorn." I'm not the kind of writer who can look at a
144 player and say this person technically can do this and this and this and I want to
145 showcase it. For me music is something that has to be really personal. I have to go back
146 into childhood memories, kind of feelings, I have to really transport myself into an
147 experience to feel motivated to write. Because when I was a child and doing music, I
148 didn't learn music because somebody had — because I was in school and thought music
149 would be an interesting thing to do or somebody pushed me to do it. My early motivation

150 to do music all came from me. When that woman, Mrs. Butler, moved to Windom, I was
151 five years old. And my parents invited her to come up to our house for dinner, and after
152 dinner she sat down at the piano and played. And I remember she played like this
153 classical thing, actually something I'd recognized from my mother's records. And then
154 she started playing stride jazz. And I immediately could feel that there was something in
155 that that wasn't the same as the other thing. I remember recognizing somehow the
156 difference between pop and classical at that moment. But the personality that came
157 through — she had red hair, she was flamboyant, she was eccentric, she wore bright
158 green moo moos and purple slippers. She was just intense. And the intensity came
159 through the music. She was like Dorothy Donegan. And when she would play she would
160 be laughing and accidentally go off the end of the piano, Victor Borge style. Such
161 technique, but soul. And that thing for me was just so incredibly important in the music.
162 And so when I went into my own music and I started playing, for me it was like fantasy.
163 You know I would play something and I would shut my eyes — I could play for hours.
164 And I used to fantasize when I'd play piano, I'd fantasize that there were talent scouts
165 from cars that would drive past Windom. Because Windom was in the sticks. It was
166 nowhere. And my dream was like to go to New York someday. Even though I had no
167 idea what New York was you know. Maybe I psychically kind of knew what might come
168 someday. So I used to fantasize that there were talent scouts in cars that had machinery
169 that could hear inside of homes and that they were listening to me. So I was always full
170 of fantasy in my music. And you know when you're a child you experience
171 disappointment for the first time, sadness, romantic love maybe, intensity, fear, all the
172 emotions you have are the most intense in your childhood, because that's the first
173 experience you have. So many things touch you then. So I always go back to that.
174 Sometimes I'm inspired by a painting, the textures, the colors, the lines that touch me
175 somewhere. Music for me, the beauty in music is not necessarily music, it's the thing that
176 — music for me is like a sound manifestation of something much deeper. I'm trying to
177 get some feeling inside me out or some kind of experience or some kind of vibration,
178 something, and codify it in sound, to transport other people to that same place. So I'm not
179 just trying to create interesting sound, I'm trying to transport an experience through
180 music.

181 MR: I can hear it in your pieces. And I was interested to hear the other night that your pieces
182 don't seem to usually start with one groove and keep in all the way. That they have
183 sections and things happen to the time and things happen to the emotion within them.

184 MS: Yeah. You know it's something I started to realize about jazz, because I have to say I'm
185 really disappointed in a lot of jazz I hear — not that I listen and say I'm disappointed —
186 but I just lose interest pretty quickly. And I think that jazz at one time was music that, it

just evolved. Later it was named jazz, and then everybody goes back and analyzes how it came into being or whatever. But it was something that came up spontaneously from something very deep and cultural and human and personal and sociological, everything came together. And for me now, what happens is when people, say they're writing music, they have this template of how music has been behind them. Like okay it's jazz. That means it has a rhythm section, probably drumset, it means that there's a bass line, it means that there is something comping, it means that there is a solo section, it means that there's a tune, and then that tune is going to be used for improvisation and then there's going to be a development. And without even thinking about it, when you sit down to compose it's very easy to have this grid, boom. It's planted in the back of your head, and then you end up, okay maybe you fill in the blanks with a different melody or a different set of chord changes that are slightly different, a few little innovations but it's still stuck in this grid that, it's like you have in the back of your head. And so for me what I try to do is make my music about experience and throw away that grid. And when I try to do it, say okay I have this orchestra, this is a chamber group. In this group I have 13 wind instruments. And I have much more, because each of the saxophone players can play flute, they can play clarinet. Now I have a guy that can play oboe and English horn. I have all these mutes available for trombones, I have all these flugel and mutes available for the trumpet. I have lots of different ways of playing the piano that could be available. The strings, everything. The bass can be arco, it can be pizzicato, the drummer can be more like a percussion player. I have the element of space. I can use just a piano and a flute. I don't have to use the whole band, saxes versus the trumpets, and do it in the same way. And so if you can just release yourself, the beauty of having a jazz group is that you have all these people that understand this art of improvisation and they have a basis and a history to put that language into something logical. But they're all open minded enough to not necessarily do that in a style that comes from the 1940s or 30s or whatever. But they all — you know Scott Robinson, he's into C melody saxophone and he's into all sorts of old style things, but he also loves Sun Ra and he has such a wide world that's coming — and I have that through all the different musicians. So I try to just open myself up and say I want to create something unlabeled. No grid. No styles. No nothing coming through me. Of course you can't avoid it. I've listened to a lot of Gil Evans. I've listened to a lot of Ravel, I've listened to a lot of Brookmeyer. All those things I hear, but try to really be conscious of getting rid of this thing. And the score paper with eight bars. I never write with bar paper. I put up a huge piece of score paper with a thousand tiny staves with no bar lines. And I even try to get away from looking at the stave. I stand up and I dance and I move around and I sing and sometimes I'll run a tape recorder while I'm doing it. And then I go to the piano and I try to figure out what the hell I'm doing.

224 Because the minute I'm thinking about music it becomes music. I want the music to be
225 that other thing. And then I codify it in notes, in little black dots and lines. To try to
226 translate it. Does it make sense?

227 MR: It does. It's wonderful to hear. It's really innovative I think. I know what you mean like,
228 you know, you get used to putting your shout chorus three quarters of the way through
229 and, what's going to happen at the solo, put a background after the solo.

230 MS: Or that there even is a shout chorus, you know? It's like what is a shout chorus and why?
231 Hasn't there been music written for centuries and in different cultures and nobody had a
232 shout chorus. Why in jazz do we always have to have a God damn shout chorus? That's
233 kind of how I deal. Sometimes I hear large ensemble jazz music, so you know if you
234 think about music, just — like I went to Brazil, you know that probably 'cause I talked
235 about that hang gliding piece. But I went to Brazil and one of the powerful things in
236 Brazil was that [phone ringing] one of the powerful things in Brazil was that in Brazil
237 music feels just synonymous with the life. Everybody makes music a part of their life.
238 Music isn't something you go to the conservatory for, that they have a building for, that
239 they have funding for. Music is something that makes life tolerable. It's a valve for
240 releasing and creating beauty out of something that's sometimes miserable or sometimes
241 beautiful or whatever. But it's an expression that everybody uses. That don't know what
242 bar lines are and what a four-bar phrase is. They sing in a phrase that they feel. And all
243 the other stuff of writing it down and analyzing it is just a means to kind of put that into
244 place. But music is the most natural thing in the world. And sometimes I think at school
245 we make it the most complex thing in the world and it shouldn't be. And to me music
246 should speak — actually I met Wayne Shorter when I was in Brazil. And he said that
247 Miles used to say he liked music that doesn't sound like music. And I was like hallelujah.
248 Me too.

249 MR: How do you impart that — some of your philosophies — to other students? Is it possible
250 to do that?

251 MS: Well I try to talk about it like that. And I try to just show them how I dance around and
252 try to figure my way into music, and then I go through technical things. Modal things.
253 And sometimes I sit down and I show them the modes, and that if you take all the modes
254 that come from the white keys on the piano, that is the mode, meaning if you pick as
255 ground zero one of the notes, like if you take the white keys and you go from C to C and
256 you have C on the bottom, and then you move up from there, that, you have a different
257 proportion of whole steps and half steps then if you put an A on the bottom. And that
258 proportion of whole steps and half steps in relationship to that bottom note changes the
259 feeling of that, from sad to bright, or bright to dark, or happy or however you want to talk
260 about it. And the association with that is pretty universal. I think everybody would say

that F to F on the white keys, lydian, is the brightest. And if you move up a fifth from that and you go C to C, you have the major scale. That's still pretty bright. It's not quite as bright as lydian. And if you go up a fifth from that, you get to something called mixolydian. It has one note that's a little bit darker. It's still happy because it's got that major third. And so slowly the things get darker and darker. But there's a mathematical progression to it. If those notes keep moving up a fifth there's one note in that mode that changes that goes down by a half step. And those go down by a fifth. And so I try to show that there is math behind all this beauty. Just like if you look at a tree and you say oh that tree is so beautiful and it feels so good and it shades me or whatever. But if you go back into when that tree started growing, immediately in the growth of those branches you can see the Fibonacci series. You know? The spiral is going the opposite way and it's always in a progression of one, two, three, five, eight, thirteen and so that to me in the world there is math behind the beauty. So if you can find beauty, changes are there is organization behind that. And then when you discover with that organization is you can continue organizing to try to create more beauty. But it isn't just that math creates beauty, beauty has math behind it. So I try to encourage students to look for something that just feels good, then try to find the logic in it, keep developing the logic, but kind of let their left and right brain work together so that it doesn't become too analytical. And never thinking what do they think I should write, what's going to be hip. What should I adopt to be cool. But try to stay inside. I always feel like the thing that makes each person unique is that you are you, nobody on earth can imitate you, nobody can be more you than you are. So that your job is to become you to the deepest degree that you can, and that's where your beauty and that's where your mastery is, in developing yourself. I think so often it's really easy to look at other people and say oh he's a master, I have to try to be like that, I have to follow him. No, you have to find the depth of yourself and be disciplined and develop yourself to the same degree that those people were disciplined and developed themselves. And that's the thing that nobody can imitate. And that's where your strength, and that's where your gift is. That's what people want to see, is feel the uniqueness of each other. That's where you really communicate something fresh with somebody. It's hard to do that.

MR: Marvelous. Wow. You gave me a lot of food for thought here. Excellent. Is it, from a logistical standpoint, difficult to keep a band together these days?

MS: Well not really. You know I think it would be difficult except that thankfully my whole group there's a mutual respect in the group, to me, to each other, hopefully they feel that from me. And when you have that respect for each other, everybody's feeling respected by each other and you want to be in that situation. So when we come together immediately there is this good feeling. And everybody sits down to play, because we

298 played this gig for five years every Monday night in New York when Bizioni's was
299 around. It's kind of like putting on an old glove. It's been difficult for me just time wise,
300 the logistics of the phone calls, the money, the contracts, being on top of it, and now I've
301 finally just got a manager so that's going to be much better.

302 MR: I heard that. You got John Levy to be your manager.

303 MS: Yeah. Who'd you hear that from?

304 MR: Well I heard it from Bob I think.

305 MS: Bob Brook—

306 MR: Bob Nowak.

307 MS: Oh yeah, yeah.

308 MR: And I know John, because Joe Williams actually helped us start this interview process.

309 MS: Really?

310 MR: And so John visited the college and I actually got to interview John and he is, I'm pleased
311 to hear that you've got an association with him.

312 MS: I'm so excited, I'm just like so happy. I mean I called them for a recommendation. I
313 never in a million years thought he'd take me on. And I sat down with him and I said —
314 you know because then they wanted to meet, he and Devra Hall, his wife, and so we were
315 talking and I said, I showed him my whole schedule for the year. I said, "well I know this
316 is peanuts." You know, he's worked with all the greats. What I make, financially, and can
317 bring to them is nothing. So I said, "I realize this isn't much." And he said, "no, no, no,"
318 he said, "I only look at two things, if I can help somebody and if I like them." And I
319 could tell he really meant that. And that was just so nice to hear. Because I don't know
320 how many — I think most managers are looking at how much money is she making, is it
321 enough to really make it worth my while. Of course practically you have to do that. But
322 I'm sure a lot of his success through the years has been that — that must feel so great for
323 the artists that work with him to feel that that's what's behind his motivation.

324 MR: Right. Joe spoke very, very highly of him. They had a relationship for so many years and
325 they said it was just on a handshake and that they just —

326 MS: Actually we haven't even signed a contract yet. They started working with me and
327 there's no contact now. I'm sure there will be. I don't care. I never had a contract with
328 my record company really. After a while for my records, but we had this other record out
329 for months and we haven't even done the publishing contract yet. It's just — but I like to
330 work with people that I trust and they trust me.

331 MR: Did you get any Business of Music courses along the way?

332 MS: I did one course at Eastman. And it was good. But you don't really learn anything until
333 you make mistakes, and I've made a few this year. That's part of the reason I needed a
334 good manager. So now, you know, when you're first writing music, I mean you dream of

335 having a career and people asking you to do music. But when you're first writing and
336 you're in school you have so much time just to be creative. And you don't realize what a
337 special thing that is, to have nobody know what you're doing, and to have nobody care.
338 Because you can just be in your world and really bounding things off yourself and the
339 people are playing it undistracted. Okay? So all of a sudden people, they like your music
340 and they come to you but that creates a whole 'nother problem. Suddenly you're
341 distracted too, with putting gigs together, and you don't have this time to just allow your
342 music to develop and your ideas to fester or whatever they need to do. So I mean what
343 I'm hoping is that now that they're handling everything, I'm going to be more like I was
344 when I was in school, and more like I was before I was busy. That I'll be home just
345 thinking about music again. It's a blessing, wow.

346 MR: Wow. I wanted to ask you about a couple of things, some quotes I picked up from you,
347 which I thought were pretty interesting.

348 MS: Hopefully they're real. Every once in a while I'll read one and I say I never said that.

349 MR: It said, "one of the most difficult things in writing is discerning between a natural
350 spontaneous idea and what is habit or laziness."

351 MS: Um hum. Yeah. Sometimes you sit down and something just comes to you easily. And
352 then you say to yourself, well is this something magical? Is it divine? Is it something my
353 muse gave to me? Or is this just the same old crap and that's why it came easily to me
354 and I really need to search and push further? So sometimes I hem and haw over that a lot.

355 MR: Right. I'm wondering if you've ever worked with synthesizers?

356 MS: A little bit. Not much.

357 MR: Because I think that, what you just said, sometimes applies to that. Because if you get a
358 beautiful reverb-drenched sound on the synthesizer it can sound really—

359 MS: Yeah.

360 MR: But musically there might not be too much behind it.

361 MS: Yeah I do all my writing just in front of score paper and then using a piano. I don't use
362 synthesizers. Some people use it to really develop their ideas. I know Kenny Werner uses
363 things, and he turns things upside down and tries all different combinations of things and
364 he writes beautiful music. And he said he comes up with things he would never come up
365 with if he didn't have those tools, to try things backwards and, you know, I can believe
366 that. But for me it's a distraction. Because I need to get, like I was saying before, kind of
367 more to that meditative place. And if I'm pushing buttons and everything, forget it.

368 MR: Um hum. Speaking of meditation, I think you also said that lately you've needed a lot
369 more silence in your life.

370 MS: Um hum.

371 MR: If you were living back in, was it Windom?

372 MS: Um hum.

373 MR: And somehow you could still be writing and have a band, do you think the atmosphere of
374 that town would affect your music differently from living in New York City?

375 MS: Probably. I wouldn't want to do that.

376 MR: You got out of there, right?

377 MS: Yeah. I wouldn't want to do that because I really love being in the city. So what I mean
378 by silence, actually I love the intensity of the city, and I love the feeling of going out my
379 front door and there's a thousand restaurants, I can walk down the street, I don't have to
380 drive anywhere. Because living in town like Windom for 18 years, I feel like you're kind
381 of isolated. And I think I've had enough isolation. I'm not one of those people that
382 dreams of living in a cabin somewhere. I would die. I love nature, don't get me wrong,
383 I'm the first to want to go out with my bird book and binoculars or whatever, but for me I
384 enjoy living in the city. More what I mean by silence is not listening to music all the
385 time. And you know we're in just the first few decades of this situation where you can
386 listen to anything in a second off the Internet, and people send you a CD at the drop of
387 hat, or you get your e-mail and somebody's sent you an MP3 file or whatever, or
388 something they've just written, or they want you to hear. And I'm so inundated with
389 music. I can't absorb anymore. People are, "did you hear this, did you check this out? I
390 know about this recording from here and then I had a bootleg of this and I had a outtake
391 of that," and I just wonder how people can listen to that much sound and still have space
392 in their own head for their undiscovered sounds? And I think it's really unhealthy. It's
393 just way, way, way too much. And I have a stack of really hundreds of CDs that I haven't
394 gotten around to listening to yet. And I've gotten to the point where I just said, okay, I
395 need silence. I can't listen to all this music. It's not my job.

396 MR: Yeah. It's not your job. Wow. I'll shorten this one up, but it says, "love of music doesn't
397 always manifest itself in the wish to make money as a musician. Having a monstrous
398 career is not a marking stick for being successful." That's a heavy statement.

399 MS: Yeah, there's a lot of great composers that weren't really discovered in their lifetime that
400 much, the Charles Ives and people who went a great portion of their life being really
401 unrecognized yet were strong in developing what they did. It didn't really change
402 anything for them. I mean easy to say, because I've been lucky that way. But I have to
403 say I didn't expect to have the career that I have. I actually didn't even set out to do it. I
404 kind of expected, I honestly, people laugh and they think that I'm joking, but I honestly
405 expected that maybe I'd have to be a waitress. I've been a waitress before. I was a truck
406 stop waitress, that I'd be a music copyist maybe for a really long time, maybe forever.
407 That maybe I'd have to do other things. And then I'd write and do my thing on the side
408 on my own. So the fact that, actually I got a little bit worried when I did start making a

409 living because I thought oh my God I'm going to get commissioned and then I'm going
410 to feel like I have to do this. And I always wanted to do what I'm doing because I want
411 to. I don't, you know if I decided I didn't want to write music — I doubt it would happen
412 but it could — that if I wanted to quit and just do something else, say I just suddenly got
413 interested in something else creatively, I would just do that. In college I almost switched
414 majors to astrophysics.

415 MR: Wow.

416 MS: I wasn't smart enough, but I really, I took an astronomy course, physics and astronomy,
417 and I was so interested in that, and I really came close to changing my major.

418 MR: Do you have hobbies now that provide some part away from music for you?

419 MS: Um, yeah, interests. Some interests. I mean now I've gotten all excited about astronomy
420 again. I want to buy a telescope. I'm interested in Chi Chuan and some kind of martial
421 arts kinds of things. You know I like to read, I like to ride bikes, for years I loved dance, I
422 love to go see dance. I'd like to take Flamenco dancing. I haven't done it, but I'd like to.
423 It's just a matter of being in town enough to do it. Because I love Flamenco music. And
424 that's another thing that's maybe going to be the result of having a manager is just taking
425 more time to do those things. Because all those things, you know when I was a child, I
426 think this is the other thing that's powerful about when you're younger and why I like to
427 go back to the feeling of what it was when I made music as a child. Because when I was a
428 child music was very important and nobody ever had to ask me to practice. I practiced
429 constantly and I loved to play. But everything that I did I did with the same degree of
430 passion that I did music. When I ice skated I was just, I was so passionate about that. And
431 I have the whole dress and the business, and we did ice skating shows and I remember
432 the first time I saw Janet Lynn skate in a skating show. And she came towards me. I was
433 sitting in like the third row. And when she came on the ice and came towards me I was so
434 excited that she as like flying all through the air. It was like my vision just went nuts.
435 And I look to Janet Lynn in the same way — and the only other time that ever happened
436 to me in my life is when I met Gil Evans. He came walking towards me and I got so
437 freaked out that my visual field, I must — something must have optically started spazzing
438 out behind my eye. Because he was flying through the air and I couldn't catch him. And I
439 was thinking this was what happened to me exactly with seeing Janet Lynn skate. You
440 know? But then, so I loved her to the degree I loved Gil Evans. And now, you know, I
441 miss getting into things with the same degree of passion that I do music. Because music
442 isn't enough for me in life. There's other things too. And I love music but I think what I
443 love about music is it's a valve for other things. I love life, and I want more time to live.
444 And to me music is, one of the problems with musicians is I think they get so caught up
445 in making records and going to the next project that very often the person's first record is

the most powerful. Because that record represents years of just working on your own and doing other things in life, and then suddenly you become so busy doing your music you aren't paying attention so much to the other things in your life because they aren't as important as the music. But what feeds the music? Music is fed by a deep and rich life. So I think it's really important to have other things in your life that you can do with equal love.

MR: Wow. You said some wonderful things today. I was going to ask you but you've almost answered it, or, what you envision for yourself. Because by the way, I'd like to do this about every five years maybe and see where your career is at.

MS: Oh, that would be interesting. That would be really interesting. I'd even like to go back and look at it and say oh, did she think she knew what was going on. Because sometimes I see that. I see things I said a long time ago and I go wow, I changed my mind about that now.

MR: Can you think ahead five years?

MS: Not really, not really. I know I don't like to take commissions too far ahead, because sometimes I think wow, if I wanted to move to Rio in two years I want to be able to do that. For instance, I like having an apartment. Because I like the idea, even though I've been there for several years now, I like the idea that if I just wanted to pick up and do something new I could. That my life isn't so, you know, stuck in some physical thing that I can't just like move out of it. And the same is musically. I know a few things I'd love to do. I want to write more for dance. I have a wish someday to write for the New York City Ballet, for this choreographer, Christopher Wheeldon, who I love. I think he's one of the great modern — a combination of modern dance and classical ballet, and I really would like to write for him. I would like to collaborate more with people outside of the jazz world more, maybe more in the pop world or people from other countries. Milton Nascimento or something like that. Egberto Gismonti or, different people from all over. Paco DeLucia. People who's music inspires me so that when I bring my thing to it, they bring something new to me, that it's not just that I keep developing my own space but that new influences come in. People that I just go I have no idea what you're doing but I want to learn about that. So I hope in five years I'm not just doing the same thing. God. And so sometimes I think you have to — if you set your goal, there's a book called — wait a minute now let me think — it was by Margaret Mead's daughter, it's called *Composing A Life*. And the premise of the book is that there's kind of a difference between men and women maybe, that men more often, they set a goal and that in their life they pursue that goal, and anything that comes in and kind of pushes them off track a little bit to impede getting to that goal, they tend to push it away because they're maybe culturally or, who knows, they are kind of trained or oriented to fixing on a goal and

483 achieving that. Whereas women, maybe by the nature of childbearing and their lives
484 changing so drastically or for whatever reason, she doesn't really know exactly, and she
485 cites five womens' lives, how women tend to maybe set sort of a fuzzy goal or maybe a
486 strong goal, but often in their lives other things come in that take them to drastically new
487 places. And she talks about life as being an improvisation. And so sometimes — I never
488 expected really to be doing this, what I'm doing. I had no real idea, no set path, it just
489 kind of happened. I studied with Brookmeyer, Brookmeyer introduced me to radio
490 orchestra. Suddenly I ended up here. I met Gil Evans, somehow. So I kind of leave things
491 open and I like to watch who comes into my life and go — oh that's really cool, okay,
492 I'm going to take this detour. So I like to look this way but always with like a little
493 peripheral vision. I hope when I look back at my life I just go Holy Moses, look it went
494 here and here and I never expected I'd go here after this. I hope so.

495 MR: All right. Well we'll make a date for five years and see where we're at.

496 MS: Cool.

497 MR: If you're in Rio, we'll come down there.

498 MS: Yeah, yeah. Have you been there?

499 MR: I have not.

500 MS: Oh, talk about life changes. Yeah. Deep.

501 MR: Great. Well this has really been very interesting.

502 MS: Well good.

503 MR: And you speak as well as your music comes out I think.

504 MS: Well thanks.

505 MR: And congratulations on your Nammy — Grammy nomination. Nammy Gromination.

506 MS: Thank you.

507 MR: Yeah. That's great. And you have a great band and I'm sure they—

508 MS: I'm lucky in that respect. I am really lucky that — because people always ask that
509 question about is it hard to keep it together. I'm lucky that it's not because they're there
510 for me, and they are in such a big way, they're so nice. We're kind of the mutual — it
511 would make people nauseous if they heard — it's like a mutual admiration. "Oh you
512 played so beautifully last night." "Oh, man, you know that you're this." You know?
513 That's so nice. It's like a family. And I guess that's the way it has to be. If it wasn't that,
514 if I ever got the feeling I was doing my music and people were there doing it because
515 they kind of felt like they had to, didn't know how to say no or whatever. At that point,
516 and it has come to that with a couple of people, that I could feel that they were
517 dissatisfied, and then you just kind of gently say you know what? Move on. Do your
518 thing. Everybody should do what they want to do, and I certainly don't want anybody
519 ever sitting there playing my music because they feel like they have to or they need the

520 money. If they don't love doing it, I'll search for somebody hopefully that will. That's
521 my wish.

522 MR: Great.

523 MS: Okay.

524 MR: Well thanks for your time.

525 MS: Thank you. Good job on the things you asked.