

“AS A JAZZ DRUMMER I CREATED MUSIC ON THE SPOT WITH TWO ARMS. COMPOSING GAVE ME AS MANY ARMS AS I WANTED.”

## MAVERICK COMPOSER

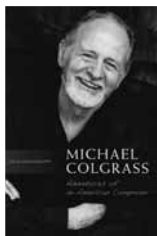
# MICHAEL COLGRASS

### ADVENTURE + ADVICE APLENTY IN NEW AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Crystal Chan

PULITZER PRIZE WINNER Michael Colgrass is best known as a composer. However, the man has worn many hats, and the eighty-nine short anecdotes of his new autobiography *Michael Colgrass: Adventures of an American Composer* chronicle everything from his conception (yes, conception!) and lower-class immigrant upbringing in Chicago as a teenaged caricaturist and jazz drummer to his stints as a percussionist in the U.S. army and New York City. Then we follow Colgrass to Toronto (his home base for over 35 years), from where he blossoms as a composer, Neuro-Linguistic Programming master trainer, Arctic explorer, educator, and acting and dancing student (Colgrass was offered the lead in an American Repertory Theater production of *The Country Girl*). Along the way we meet a dizzying number of big names: Dizzy himself (Gillespie), Copland, Cage, even Elizabeth Taylor. And plenty more. But Colgrass is not afraid to speak frankly and sometimes irreverently of such luminaries as Milhaud, Stravinsky, Bernstein, and Charles Munch.

Colgrass's exploits are bizarre, emotional, humorous, heartbreaking, ironic: a stripper lands Colgrass a gig in the *West Side Story* orchestra; he composes a ballet overnight; he catches a NYC bank robber. His wondrous stories seem quasi-mythical: Colgrass seduces a Russian spy; his father is a mafia man with friends in Al Capone's gang; hidden backstage, he thinks he witnesses Miles Davis play a private tribute over the body of Sid Catlett, who had just passed away during an intermission at his own



show. This tone of 'magical realism' is set right from the beginning with his 'magical conception' predicted by a psychic. When asked whether he "recklessly blended myth and reality" (his own phrase from the book, describing an Italian villager),

“IF I DON'T KNOW WHO I REALLY AM, HOW CAN I WRITE AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY? SO I DECIDED TO WRITE ABOUT EPISODES IN MY LIFE INSTEAD—PIVOTAL, EXHILARATING STORIES THAT READERS CAN PIECE TOGETHER TO FORM A PICTURE OF ME AND THE CREATIVE GENERATION TO WHICH I BELONG.”

Colgrass was quick to attest that although he never kept diaries, "as I recount these stories, I recall them just about as fresh as they were then; I can remember down to where I was sitting."

Colgrass's musical compositions are often programmatic: they tell stories. Similarly, his book has accessible storytelling as its goal. He sought to leave "the boring stuff out" and made sure to include encounters that were funny or thoughtful and captured pivotal moments that teach something invaluable to everyone, not just musicians. Stories with Stravinsky and Gunther Schuller, impressive names that they are, were cut because they lacked a twist or a joke. In the end, musicians see how other arts, sports, relationships, and much more can inspire musical creativity; non-musicians are shown how embracing music can enhance all other arenas of life.

Above all, Colgrass avoided writing a dry composer's manual. Rather, he slips tips in within engaging incidents. For example, a zany misadventure involving the Kama Sutra and ginger becomes indicative of his composing mantra. "An aphrodisi-

ac enhances the experience," explained Colgrass with a chuckle. "And when I'm composing I'm always thinking: how can I up the ante? How can I increase the intensity, increase and deepen what I'm trying to do?" His advice certainly comes from unexpected people and places. Apart from the Kama Sutra, we receive advice from a B-movie sex symbol, boxing champions, heroin addicts, and actor Will Geer.

For musicians hoping to find a more direct recipe for success in the music business, Colgrass had this to say:

"Whenever I say I make my living as a composer, people raise their eyebrows and can't believe it—including composers, including successful people like Krzysztof Penderecki. Well, I believe that you do

what you really want to do. And whatever you're doing is what you really want to do. Of course, it must be realistic. You can't be a pianist if you have no arms; that's not realistic. I was determined to be a composer. If you want something very badly you're going to create ways to make it work." ■

As the composer-in-residence, Colgrass is currently working on a commission for a wind ensemble piece to be premiered at the University of Wisconsin in April.

For more from Colgrass:

» *Soundings: The Music of Michael Colgrass*, an Emmy Award winning 1982 PBS documentary

» *Lessons with Kumi* (2000, Real People Press), a book outlining Michael's techniques for performance and creativity

» His music: a great starter recording is *Déjà Vu* for Percussion Quartet and Orchestra with soloists Richard Holmes, Richard O'Donnell, John Kasica, and Thomas Stubbs alongside the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra and conducted by Leonard Slatkin (New World Records, NW 318).

» To read Michael's advice for young musicians, see page 52.

[www.colgrassadventures.com](http://www.colgrassadventures.com)  
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