

Portrait || Michael Kennedy
Produced by Vandhana Ravi

~ *Up, Up and Away by the Fifth Dimension*~

So my name is Michael Kennedy and I'm a professor at Brown University. I was born in Long Island, and I grew up in Pennsylvania in the Lehigh Valley, north of Philadelphia. My first encounter with music of my own, other than what my parents were playing, was when my brother would come home from college, my brother Ken, he was eleven-and-a-half years older than I - so always the big brother. And, I remember he brought home the *Fifth Dimension* and especially this album *Up, Up and Away*. So, that was the first time that I realised oh-my-gosh - I was probably seven years old - and I was feeling almost like a college kid because I was listening to the music of the college kids.

~ *Up, Up and Away by the Fifth Dimension*~

I remember distinctly going to an eighth-grade birthday party for my friend Ellen Niewoehner, with whom I'm still in touch. And every time it's her birthday in March, I think of the album by *America*, and especially the song 'A Horse with No Name'. She loved horses and I had a crush on her at the time, and you know, I think people were even making out at this birthday party and it was just like- and the music *America - A Horse with No Name*, takes me back to being that eighth grader.

~ *A Horse with No Name by America*~

But it was also around that time that I began to discover that I was principally interested in jazz. And, I think the band that made the transition for me was a band called *Blood, Sweat and Tears* and the song that they played that I thought was so cool was something called *Spinning Wheel- What goes up, must come down. Spinning wheels, gotta go round*.

~ *Spinning Wheel by Blood, Sweat and Tears*~

And, that transitioned me into jazz and so the one tradition, the one constancy I would say across all my life is that I've always been exploring old styles of jazz. I think it has its roots in my father always playing Big Band music. But you know, Big Band music was both sort of a white appropriation of black music on the one hand but also a continuation and a space where black artists could be more readily recognised and it was filled with racism but also was filled with promise, I've always felt. And you know, my original household was not especially progressive - unfortunately, there were a lot of racist elements in it, but in music, it wasn't there, or at least it had the promise of not being there.

~ *Spinning Wheel by Blood, Sweat and Tears*~

I have always been able to speak rather well extemporaneously, by improvisation, right? But, I'm never comfortable going into any setting without having a script and so I think I have a certain if I can

be self-indulgent, a certain jazz style in the way in which I talk, where for example, you've seen how I don't mind going on a tangent. But that's partly because the greatest discoveries are often in that tangent because you're freeing yourself to express something that could not be scripted. And just like in jazz sometimes the most beautiful expressions are enabled by the wonderful composition.

~ *Goodbye Pork Pie Hat by Charles Mingus*~

So, when I was thinking about this music earlier, one thing I didn't mention was that when I was in high school, one of the most popular styles of music in the Lehigh Valley was Hard Rock or Metal and it was really angry music.

~*Dominance and Submission by Blue Oyster Cult*~

It was a music that was about solidifying my identity rather than opening up my identity and so even some of the songs that I loved as a teenage boy, I'm now embarrassed by - '*Dominance and Submission*' - I mean I still love it at some level, but I'm embarrassed by it at another.

~*Fables of Faubus by Charles Mingus*~

It's also complicated to look at jazz because American state power, America foreign policy, use jazz as a means of competing against communism. So jazz could be put in the service of American Empire so to speak, but I think, that music was always so defiant. And so, one of the reasons why I think I've stayed with jazz my whole life is that it can be appropriated but it can never be compromised, because even when it is appropriated it finds a way to remind us that this incredible musical form was born, out of resistance, it was born out of a yearning to be more than a system would allow. And it demonstrated its practice and its performance. Jazz is about possibility. And if America possibility as well, it's good to imagine America as having a jazz anthem.

~*Fables of Faubus by Charles Mingus*~

For me, music helps in the most profound way. In times of sorrow, and in times where we need to feel solidarity with the past, where we need to feel our roots, where we need to feel our connection to that which made us. And, you know I was raised catholic and at every funeral I attend, whenever I hear Ave Maria, I can't help but cry.

~*Ave Maria by Schubert*~

And that's because it connects me with this very deep reverence that my family always possibly had. I feel like music can express in general but also in particular lives, the fact that while our bodies are transient, our spirits endure and they endure most profoundly through music.

~*Ave Maria by Schubert*~