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► **To cite this version:**

Jean-Philippe Heberlé. An Interview with Mark SaFranko: The Songwriter. *Miranda : Revue pluridisciplinaire sur le monde anglophone. Multidisciplinary peer-reviewed journal on the English-speaking world*, 2019, Guerre en poésie, poésie en guerre, 18, 10.4000/miranda.18465 . hal-02939103

**HAL Id: hal-02939103**

<https://hal.univ-lorraine.fr/hal-02939103v1>

Submitted on 15 Sep 2020

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# An Interview with Mark SaFranko: The Songwriter

**Jean-Philippe Heberlé**

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This interview with the American writer and songwriter Mark SaFranko was conducted in Nancy, France, on 10 January 2019 during the writer's residency at the University of Lorraine from 1 October 2018 to 31 January 2019 within the ARIEL project. This project – Auteur en Résidence Internationale en Lorraine – was initiated by Céline Sabiron, Barbara Schmidt and Emmy Peultier. Thank you to Barbara Schmidt for suggesting this interview.

**Crédit photographique : L3 Info-Communication, Université de Lorraine**



## Preamble

Jean-Philippe Heberlé (JPH): Mark SaFranko, you are a writer, composer, songwriter, musician, painter and actor.

Mark SaFranko (MSF): I have been those things at various times.

JPH: This interview is about your activity as a musician, especially as a composer and songwriter. How would you define yourself? Would you define yourself as a songwriter or composer?

MSF: Musically, probably a songwriter, although my compositional activities have spread out more widely as time has gone on into everything from ambient music to atonal things and what I call cinematic sort of music, so it's become more diffused I'd say.

JPH: In fact, I have asked you this question because some of your albums are purely instrumental, aren't they?

MSF: That's correct.

JPH: Like *Music from an Unmade Movie* for example?

MSF: Yes, that's one, that was the first one.

JPH: And it was based on a fictitious film I assume?

MSF: No, one was one of my stories that was adapted into a screenplay and it was actually half shot; the film was half shot and then left unfinished because of funding problems. And the second was a screenplay they wrote based on one of my novels from an Austrian film maker that couldn't put the deal together for. So, they were compositions on that record for sequences of two films that were never made. And rather than say *Music from UNMADE films*, it sounded better to say *Music from AN UNMADE Movie*.

JPH: Your latest record is *Some Kind of Mood* and it is also an instrumental album?

MSF: That is also true.

JPH: So how did you come up with this idea of an instrumental album this time? It is not based on a film project, is it?

MSF: No, those influences come from sort of everywhere and sometimes it's frankly nothing more than a matter of the dearth of lyrical ideas and something begins to form and I sit there, play with it until it sounds like a composition, then I already hear other parts forming, so I know that I can do something with it as an instrumental piece and that's how they happen. So, as I said, sometimes they're really nothing more than a lack of lyrical ideas.

JPH: Would you consider yourself an American songwriter? Is there anything specifically American in your music or lyrics?

MSF: Probably over the years. It's a bit comical, but I'm playing a show, a solo show in Besançon on January 23<sup>rd</sup> and I'm doing like a dozen songs and I noticed that the word Texas (places in Texas, the state of Texas) has come up in a few songs, and I've been writing songs for longer than I care to recall, 45 years or something. And for some reasons, Texas has come up in several songs and I never set foot in the state, so that makes me a quintessential state of mind let's say. A friend of mine here said, because we were laughing about that, "you know any place you mention in America sounds good in a song, not for me but for anyone".

JPH: What about your musical training?

MSF: I took lessons from a very early age, I actually began playing the accordion because I came from a Polish neighborhood where the accordion was the instrument of choice actually. They played polkas, I didn't. I remember loving the Irish folk songs and the Italian folk songs, and I played classical music on the accordion. And then I got bored as I went into my teen years and contemporaneously with the explosion of the British invasion I switched to the guitar.

JPH: So, you had some classical music training to a certain extent. What about jazz?

MSF: Yes, I guess you could say classical training, but I'm not particularly a jazz fan. I sort of lean on the now infamous John Lennon's quote: "All jazz is shit." I don't think that's strictly true because they are classic jazz masters who I actually really like, like Thelonious Monk, John Coltrane, the two that pop into mind and then I certainly lose the train after that. I just don't respond to it the way I do to many other different kinds of what you call popular music, or classical music which I still love. So, I wouldn't call myself particularly a jazz aficionado.

JPH: Did you attend any songwriter's workshop or anything of that kind?

MSF: No, I never set foot in any one of those.

JPH: In a recent interview on French Television (France 3 Grand Est) you said that you use different parts of your brain when you write songs/compose music or write a novel/a play, but how do you decide to write an album or a novel for instance? Is it a deliberate choice from you or do you leave it to chance?

MSF: Well I have a very strict sort of works schedule which is I get out of bed every day and I work on my novels, stories or plays, whatever I'm doing there because I'm best known as that, even though I've been a musician longer than I've been a writer of plays and novels and stories and then I switch into a musical mode later in the day. So, the actual work structure is not left to chance but things occur to me all the time that I jot down in notebooks actually that I will revisit, and I know I can feel it is going to be a novel, play or story versus it's going to be a piece of music. So, the inspiration is chance let's say, but the actual structure is not chance at all. And I am a great, an avid believer that there are no such things as inspiration, you certainly work, that's the only thing that makes sense to me. Ideas occur all the time and I assume they occur to everyone.

JPH: Writing novels, plays, short stories and songs seem to be at the core of your creative process while painting and being an actor are rather secondary to them. Would you agree with that?

MSF: Yes, I would say so. I'm not an actor anymore.

## The Creative Process

JPH: Does your work as a novelist/playwright influence the way you write your songs and vice versa?

MSF: I would say not at all except that I consider them part of the same process, it's just that I am doing something different when I'm composing a piece of music or writing a lyric but they're really part of the same process and one does not really impact the other because they come from slightly different angles internally.

JPH: So, you are saying that writing songs or novels is part of the same creative process. Do you see any connection between painting, music and writing?

MSF: Well, maybe with the instrumental work because as an aquarellist so much of it is accident when doing watercolors and that also happens musically with the instrumental music, but I actually view painting as an activity in which all that other stuff gets shut off and there is a silence. That is almost a zen like meditation for me when I paint, that's another part of the brain altogether, for me anyway. Somewhere deep in those synapses. It's a very nice break from that constant churning of words and sounds. You know I was in a museum and was explaining to someone the other day: whenever I'm surrounded by paintings I have this tremendous urge to give everything up and spend the rest of my life painting if I could. I don't know if I will ever do that but it's very tempting. I've always liked the Picasso quotation. It's one that is always stuck with me: "The goal is to get back to doing what children do when they knew nothing". Obviously, I don't know if great painters do that, but for me it's meaningful.

JPH: When you compose, which comes first? The music or the words? Both?

MSF: My methods of composition changed a lot over the decades. When I was younger I had no idea what to do, I would sit down with the guitar usually and plunk away until a lyrical idea manifested itself. A lot of times that was very unsuccessful because you could sit there, plunk and nothing happened. I did process and wrote a lot of songs that way. Now I would have a very specific idea about something that I want and I find on one level that it's easier to go on with an idea than sitting there and waiting for something to happen which was what I did when I was younger. Usually when it is a song with lyrics, the idea for the lyric will come first then the song fills it out. With the instrumentals, I sit there and still plunk, but now I don't worry so much about the lyrical content because it is coming in a different way.

JPH: How do you decide between writing an instrumental or vocal album? Is it a conscious process?

MSF: For instance, for this last record that you mentioned *Some Kind of Mood*, I had a few instrumentals written and then I started thinking, well I want to fill this out to make it 40 or 45 minutes and I started looking for ideas to expand it into an album. And the same thing happens with the other songs I start. When I have five written songs, well I say I need 3, 4 or 5 more to make an album.

JPH: What lyricists do you like most? Did they have any influence on your work? Were you most particularly influenced by the lyricists of musicals for instance?

MSF: Well, I think no one can discount the influence of Bob Dylan who in many ways I think is probably the most important songwriter. The Nobel Prize notwithstanding, he has a tremendous influence on a lot of people, although I often like to say about him that one thing that is really overlooked, in my estimation, being a person that writes music, is how incredibly good his music is. Because people say he can't sing, he is a lyricist, well I happen to think he is the greatest singer who ever lived because no one ever conveys emotions in a lot of ways as he has over the years. He is a superb composer of music really, if you throw the lyrics out really.

And there are so many lyricists. There are some people that say that the greatest American song ever written was "As Time Goes by" by Herman Hupfeld who happened to be buried within one mile from where I live in New Jersey actually and lived right around the corner. He was actually quite a successful Broadway musical

writer back in the twenties I think it was the teens and twenties. “As Time Goes by” if I’m not mistaken was in the 1920s. I’m not a particular fan of musicals but there are songs from shows that live out as being great stand-alone pieces of course. And there is that old American tradition of songwriting, I mean the Irish songwriters. There are so many influences in lyrics that it is almost impossible to begin to enumerate them all.

JPH: What about your musical influences? Who are you influenced by?

MSF: Whether or not it is an influence, there are a lot of influences. For me I’ve always liked the French composers Debussy, Ravel, Scriabine – out of Russia. I’m not a particular fan of the Germans, but you hear them all the time. I like a lot of the Avant-garde composers, like John Cage who is someone that does slip in my work when I lapse into the atonal. They introduced many other elements into music. I am a great great fan of the cinema soundtrack. I happen to love Ryuichi Sakamoto who has composed a great deal of great soundtracks, although my favorite soundtrack of all time may very well be Gato Barbieri’s *LAST TANGO in PARIS* which I never tire of listening to from point A to Point Z. I’m also a great lover of the soundtrack of *CHINATOWN*, Jerry Goldsmith’s soundtrack which is an interesting one because it contains a really great theme that’s worked around through the entire album. There are also very interesting atonal sounds that are going on in it too. So, whether or not I do anything like those people I think is open to debate but I certainly listen to them repeatedly. And in many ways, I am also still stuck in the British Invasion because there is so much that came out of that in my opinion. Now it’s of course a cliché, because people say well with the Brits it was recycled American blues and rock, but they spewed it up again with a tremendous amount of originality. And the European influence came in there. It was also a very influential movement for me.

JPH: Are you also Influenced by Indian music? I think for example of “Indian Hum” from *Music from an Unmade Film*.

MSF: I am actually. The people I’m most familiar with are Shankar father and daughter. I’ve seen both of them, I had the fortune of seeing both of them play live and the daughter is unbelievably good. From the first time I heard the instrument [The sitar] I responded to it and I love the ragas.

JPH: They are actually some passages with a sitar in your music.

MSF: Yes, I do use the sitar. I actually own a Jerry Jones sitar. Jerry Jones is a very good Nashville luthier who since has unfortunately gone out of business. Their sitars were based on the old Coral ones that were made in the sixties. The quality was not that great but everybody used them. And these are very beautiful instruments that I really enjoy using whenever I can.

JPH: The first songs of yours I listened to was “Sooner or later” which seems to be your best-known song. It seems to me you were musically influenced by Lou Reed for this one? Am I mistaken or not?

MSF: That’s my most streamed song for some reason. I’m not a particular fan of Lou Reed and have never have been, but well you couldn’t help but hear him. He is in the background of a lot of music that you hear but I’ve not been a particular fan of his. You respond to some people more than others. For some reason that song is statistically the most streamed song that I have written and I have no clue why because I don’t play live, hardly ever, so the feedback is just what I see that is streaming. So, I have no idea why that song is streamed as much as it is. I’m not sure.

I think it is a pretty good performance because I like some performances of mine much better than others. Sometimes I'm really disappointed with what I've done but being a one-person band you know I'm limited. Sometimes I say to myself: God, I wish I had a better guitar player; God, I wish I had a better bass player; but unfortunately, it's all me.

JPH: Which instruments do you play to perform or compose?

MSF: Piano and guitar that's what I use.

## The Recording Process

JPH: Do you use a home studio?

MSF: I do now, but I learned everything that I know about recording in a 16-track analogue studio back in the seventies/eighties and then of course they went out, nobody uses analogue, the big reels and everything. But I find myself from the beginning fascinated by what the producers did. I was not one of those people that just went out into the booth and perform, I always saw myself looking over the shoulder of the producer or the engineer, just watching what he did and tried to steal everything that I could from that. So now I have a 24-track Yamaha which is now obsolete because everybody else uses Pro Tools now, I don't.

JPH: So, you don't book a professional studio anymore?

MSF: I do not.

JPH: But you did in the past?

MSF: I used it all the time but they cost me all my money.

JPH: Did you hire musicians at that time?

MSF: Well, I worked largely with the producer who played a lot of different instruments and my brother who is a very accomplished musician played on a lot of my early recordings.

JPH: You've said before that you are a one-person band, but do you still hire musicians?

MSF: No, I just play everything myself and I do it really in the interest of time. I do a certain thing all day long and I find dealing with musicians can be some sort of problematic, they don't show up, etc. So, in the interest of time, I just do everything myself and I own basses, I have pianos and a lot of guitars. I'm able to jerry-rig. When you watch those in the studio you can learn enough tricks to make, I think, a song sound half decent. And since I consider myself to be primarily a songwriter than like a master musician what I want to do is present the song. I don't know how it comes across but that's what I like. Aside from the instrumental stuff the other songs are really built to be covered by other people.

JPH: When you get into your home studio, do you get into it with an idea or a finished song or do you still experiment during the recording process?

MSF: I'm always going with a finished song. However, since I now control the means of production and the clock isn't running on the money, there are accidents that occur that I would now leave. The early recordings were – I don't want to say stiff – strongly within the parameter of what I had to do exactly because I needed to come out with something that was done and now there is more flexibility because I'm not

on the clock. And I hear the accidents, other people wouldn't of course, sometimes they come out really to my liking.

### The Releasing Process

JPH: You seem to have your own record label, don't you?

MSF: Yes!

JPH: And it's called *River Jack Records*, isn't it?

MSF: River Jack Records, yes!

JPH: Is it your own choice to be more independent or is it a necessity because it is difficult to secure a recording contract with a label?

MSF: Well, it's the latter. What happened was really very much a fortuitous accident. For years I used to submit my songs, but it was a whole different era back in the seventies/eighties, then things started to change. I would submit my songs to publishers, record companies I had a couple of closed calls with a record company at one point for one song, then I just became very discouraged and did not know what to do and in that meantime the digital revolution took place the home studio then emerged and most importantly Spotify and all these streaming services opened up the doors to everyone, everybody so it was kind of like I just hung around and eventually the game itself changed and since I was legitimately getting my literary work published by companies that were not me – because I resolved not to self-publish

– I felt that I could indulge in that process as a musician because I have certainly proven myself as an artist and this way I don't have to go through an impossible thing plus the fact that I am probably way out of step with what goes on in the pop music world. I am completely out of step with that, so I wouldn't probably be a viable alternative for any recording company anyway, although I have wondered about those instrumental records and I've told myself that I might find a company that would release them. I think I might try to do that at some point, if I could find the right company.

JPH: Do you release albums on a regular basis? Once a year? Or even several a year?

MSF: Several of them were released the same year because those records were done years ago and the means of getting them out then opened up, so I had them sitting there. So that's what happened with those. But I just work steadily until there's enough for a record when I consider it to be a finished record it goes out, that's basically what I do now.

### Conclusion

JPH: It seems to me that the themes (difficult relationships, violence, identity, love, psychological traumas, etc.) you deal with in your books (novels, plays, etc.) and in your songs are similar or interconnected and that everything is part of one larger piece, there's a certain unity, some kind of "conceptual continuity" to use Frank Zappa's term for the description of his craftsmanship. Would you agree with that?

MSF: I would say that is largely true. You can't probably stray too far from your principal concern as an artist. I remember Patricia Highsmith once saying that an artist has two or three themes that's basically what you're blessed with/cursed with



and you write about these two or three themes over and over again in different guises and I think that's probably true in my case. And I would say there are interconnected. If I sat down and looked at them closely I'm sure I would see interconnections. This residency has been a sort of revelation for me because there is a whole committee translating one of my novels that is coming out *The Suicide* and there are things in the book that I never know existed. People have pointed out things to me in my work that I was completely unaware of because I execute it to the best of my ability and then it's gone when it's published or something I don't give it much thought, but I suppose if I look closely I will see things that I'm just simply unaware of because as I work very instinctively things occur and I will try to roll with them. One of the things I have fortunately become rather good at is silencing that critical voice that starts to tell you this is no good or blah blah blah because then you won't get much work done. There are times when you'll judge your product inferior later on but the actual execution of it has to be devoid of the critical voice.

JPH: The song of yours you prefer is "I Still Don't Know Who I Am," but if you had to advise one or two albums of yours to anyone who is not acquainted with your music, which one would you recommend to them because it best sums up your musical activity?

MSF: It would take me a while to give you an answer. What surprised me recently, some people that regularly listened to my work have really liked this new record *Some Kind of Mood*. I don't know if it is better than the other instrumental album, it's hard for me to choose. I might take *Music for AN UNMADE Movie* over this one but I like a lot of what happens on this new record. I would say that one. Otherwise, I would say *Looking* because it contains a fairly representative sample of the different types of compositions that I do. It's also performed pretty well, I think. But frankly, several of the other albums would serve the same purpose.

JPH: Now my last question, some kind of desert island question. If you had to choose between one activity only (literature/songwriting/composition/painting) which one would you pick up? To put it more simply if you had the choice to bring a pen or a guitar on a desert island, which one would you choose and why?

MSF: That's a tough question. It is a tough question because you could amuse yourself with the guitar, you could entertain yourself because with a pen what could you do with it. Maybe I would take the guitar which is even a surprise to myself actually. You could play endlessly until your strings broke and they would. Then I don't know what you would do if the strings broke. Then you could beat on it and use it as a drum so to speak. So maybe I'd take the guitar because as I said you could entertain yourself with it more than a pen.

3 To discover or know more about Mark SaFranko's music, here is a selection of his albums that can be listened to on various streaming services:

- 4 - *I Still Don't Know Who I Am* (2012)
- 5 - *Looking* (2012)
- 6 - *Sooner or LATER* (2012)
- 7 - *Music from AN UNMADE Movie* (2013) (*InstrumentAL Album*)
- 8 - *SquARe One* (2017)
- 9 - *Some Kind of Mood* (2018) (*InstrumentAL Album*)

