

Interview with Michael Moore about the Olympia Jazz Scene and the Band Obrador

Freeform NW - KAOS FM September 2023

Interview By Tom Dyer

Tom Dyer is a musician, recording artist, radio broadcaster, and music historian from Olympia. He sat down with Michael Moore for a radio interview shortly before Michael's death in 2023. This is a rough transcription of the interview.

Tom Dyer with Freeform NW on KAOS: *So let's get it on. This is a first, something that's never happened before. This is Freeform NW on KAOS FM 89.3 a service of The Evergreen State College. Here we go, It's going to be awesome! An interview with Michael Moore, long time piano player for Obrador and general man about town. Used to play with Bert Wilson, all that stuff. Michael Moore, long time Olympian, founding member of Obrador, jazz pianist extraordinaire and just a nice guy. Michael has consented to come in and tell me everything about everything in Olympia music, because he's experienced an awful lot of it and he knows a lot of people. He might even know where the bodies are buried. Don't know, we're gonna find out.*

Freeform NW: *So to start with Michael, were you born here?*

Michael Moore: No, I was born in Schenectady, New York. Actually, I came here as an infant. So Olympia is the only town I've ever known as my hometown. That's for sure.

Freeform NW: *You grew up in Olympia . . .*

Michael: Indeed I did.

Freeform NW: *And you said you are now in the South Capital district?*

Michael: Now. Incidentally, that's where we first lived when we came to town. We moved to the Westside in 1954.

Freeform NW: *And who was we?*

Michael: My sister Judy, my younger brother Ben and my mom Bettina and dad Ben Moore.

Freeform NW: *And who were mom and dad?*

Michael: Ben and Bettina Moore, proprietors of Ben Moore's bar since 1940 until my Mom sold it in 1972.

Freeform NW: *Yes, I would say the legendary Ben Moore's. If you grew up in Olympia, that was a place you knew.*

Michael: Oh yes, no doubt about it.

Freeform NW: *You've got some pretty strong family ties in Olympia that's for sure. So when you were a kid, were you a musician from day one?*

Michael: You know, it's really interesting. When I was about 13, I guess 1960, I came home from school one day and there was a piano in the living room. My parents never said a word. They didn't ask, "Do you want to take lessons, or do you want to do this?" There was just a piano there. So I went over kind of started picking out songs on my own and learned a boogie-woogie tune in the key of C. That was about the extent of what I knew at the time. Shortly thereafter, I got a call from bass guitarist Dwayne McCasland asking me to join the band. I said, "Are you kidding me? I only know one song!" And he goes, "We'll make it work."

So we started a band in the 8th grade called the Intruders. It was Dwayne McCaslin playing guitar, myself, and Dave Ward. I don't think we had a bass player yet. Luckily, Dave Ward, the drummer, was an accomplished piano player so at any time during a rehearsal, he would jump up from the drums, run around to the piano, and go, "No like this."

Freeform NW: *And so that was band and piano lessons.*

Michael: It was and it was definitely piano lessons at the same time. Luckily, Dave was in that group. I don't know what I would have done, but you know that group stayed together through junior high school. When I was a junior in high school, about 16, Paul Hjelm, also a very well-know musician here in Olympia, came to me and said, "Ted LaVette our piano player, (who was kind of an idol of mine as a kid), just got drafted into the army so we need a piano player in the Triumphs." I said, "Come on now. I can't. You guys are way beyond me!" Paul said, "Don't worry. Come over to my house and hear the songs and the music and then you can come tryout." Well, I went to the tryout, that worked out, and they hired me. That led to playing every Saturday night at the Evergreen Ballroom for a year and a half, almost two years.

Freeform NW: *What kind of music was that?*

Michael: It was rhythm and blues.

Freeform NW: *Along the lines of the Whalers? That sort of thing?*

Michael: Yeah, that time period. Lanie Slater was the singer in the group who had a wide range of abilities as a singer and I think he had been kind of a country singer as a young kid. He was kind of like the star of the show, but you know, interesting guy. He was the keyboard player very briefly in the band before me but he didn't really like to play and sing. So they hired me and it was a really good band. Ron Westrom was the bass player and then he left and Dwayne McCaslin, who was in the previous group in junior high school joined the group as the bass player.

Freeform NW: *So you play a year and a half at the Evergreen Ballroom. What dates, years were those?*

Michael: 1964 - 65.

Freeform NW: *So the 60s thing was just starting to happen at that point and it hadn't got all that crazy stuff. It's definitely not 50s rock and roll anymore.*

Michael: Definitely not 50s rock and roll. It was a good group. We would play on Friday nights like the Vasa Hall in Hoquiam or the Aberdeen YMCA or the Longshoreman's Hall in Longview. Although the few times we played in Longview, it never really got past the first set, because there was generally a brawl that the police had to come and stop. So we just took the money and went home. It was a great experience for me, for sure. Then when the Triumphs dissolved, for what reason I don't even remember, that's when I joined the Bootmen. We recorded a record on Etiquette.

Freeform NW: *Right, with the Whalers.*

Michael: That group was interesting. It was just a quartet, you know, with guitar, bass, and drums.

Freeform NW: *What was the record you did with the Bootmen? I'm pretty sure I've played that on one of my shows.*

Michael: That 45 was *Wherever You Hide* and *Ain't It the Truth Babe* on the other side. Oh my goodness. Unfortunately, I had to be the singer in that band and I never enjoyed it for one second. Because every time I listened to myself on a recording I went, "Okay, that is the last time I'm going to sing. I'm just not going to do it anymore." But because of the nature of the beast, I was kind of forced to, although at one point Dave Rolling became the drummer in that group. He was later with the Whalers and had a really great singing voice. It kind of took me off the hook, which was good.

That band lasted about a couple years and I went into a long period where I didn't play at all. I decided I was going to be an academician and moved to Berkeley in 1969. About the time I was finishing there, I got in a car accident, tore up a knee pretty badly. I figured I had to have something to do in convalescence and though I had been away from piano for quite a while so I decided to get back into it. I bought a Fender Rhodes piano, set it up next to the bed so I could swing my legs over and play. But my ear for music and my tastes in music had changed exponentially in those five to six years I didn't play. So when I went back to playing I could not catch up to where my ears were at all. I decided, well you know I'm gonna go down to Laney College in Oakland and get in the jazz program, see what I can do. I was lucky enough to get a great teacher, Ed Kelly who was a fabulous jazz pianist, played with everybody over the years. He was very patient with me. I was ready to quit several times—being 26 by this point, right? Kind of a novice and he encouraged me a great deal so I keep playing.

When I got through the jazz program there, I ran into a bunch of other musicians and we started a thing called Burnett Street Studio down in West Berkeley down in the Oakland, Emeryville area. We converted an old garage into the studio and just invited people to come there and play and we would record them and just give them the recordings.

Freeform NW: *Would it be fair to say before you studied with that fellow that your theory knowledge was pretty basic?*

Michael: Basic minus. It was a really good vibe. I took theory of rhythm and harmony classes and solfeggio classes and that was quite an eye opener. It really was because I had never read music before that. Yeah, at all. It was a big challenge. Of course, they asked us to arrange things for the big band and that was a big challenge as well. At the Burnett Street Studio we had sessions all the time, three to four nights a week we would play there. I think it was about February of 1976, I invited Paul Hjelm and Michael Olsen, my old buddies, to come down and they came down and played. I said, "You know Vince, a saxophone player, and I are both kind of tired of Berkeley and we'd like to move up to Olympia and start a band."

That's when Obrador started. That was a whole new, you know, it ushered in an entirely new musical experience. A great band. We were kind of jazz, kind of Latin, and kind of funk. A band with zero commercial potential. One of the things we always got from the market was that "we really like your music but just don't know what shelf to put it on because you're Latin, funk and jazz but really not anything solidly in any one of those categories."

Freeform NW: *I am somebody that never heard Obrador live. All my experience with Obrador is after the fact. I've listened to your whole catalog at this point, plus live recordings. There is a definite evolution to that band. When it starts out, the first step is just a jazz band. Over the years it becomes more of a dance band.*

Michael: Well, that was kind of out of necessity. And, of course, you know, we kind of abandoned the original concept of being kind of an avant garde jazz band, with original compositions. We decided in order to get gigs, we were going to have to be more of a Latin dance band. There was kind of a big craze in Seattle at that time. We used to play up there a lot like in Bombay Bicycle Shop and the Pioneer Bank and lots of events in Seattle because there was that Latin dance craze going on at the time. We were definitely thinking about getting gigs, that's for sure.

Freeform NW: *I get it. Yeah.*

Michael: For me personally, you know, I'm fine with the latter day (recordings) but I LOVE the early stuff. I think it is just great. Kind of closest to our hearts in a way because it is so original. You will not hear another band that sounds like it, that's for sure. And you know, all the people in Obrador, all my

sisters and brothers in that band, you know, became an integral part of my life and we all learned from each other so much during those years.

Freeform NW: *Who else was in the band?*

Michael: Paul Hjelm and Michael Olsen and Steve Luceno, the bass player. He was the original bass player. We had a fella named Doug do a little bass with us who was a fantastic player too. He decided he was going to move on down to Portland and I said, "Well this ought to be really easy. They could come here in the middle of nowhere and starve with us." The next day, a friend of ours who is an artist who happened to be an Evergreen student, came and said, "Hey, I have a friend who is a bass player coming out here from New York who would really like to play with you." We went, "Oh my goodness! So we met with Steve outside the Jefferson house (a musicians' group household) over on Jefferson Street.

Freeform NW: *By the way, Steve is a prince of a fellow and a beast of a bass player.*

Michael: He's a brother. He really is.

Freeform NW: *I can tell you another thing. You're right in there in terms of doing that research for jazz in Olympia. I met Steve at my house. I didn't know him before that. Steve remembers everything.*

Michael: Yes he does!

Freeform NW: *But you're pretty darn good too! You have a good memory.*

Michael: So we met up with Steve outside the Jefferson house. It was in the afternoon and he had just driven in from New York. So we're talking to a lot of friends and we said, "Well we're going to rehearse. The down beat's at seven o'clock. Stop in. We're going to try out some new bass players, and we'll give you a shot." Steve was all excited. He turned around and ran headlong into a power pole.

Freeform NW: *Wow!*

Michael: Paul looked at me and said, "He's the guy." And he was. Jim Doey was a very, very interesting drummer because he was as much a World Music percussionist as a trap drummer. He added a distinctive thing to the music. He decided he was going to move out of the country to Mexico. And then of course, we got Steve Bentley in 1981. Boy, he was a wonderful player immediately. We knew he was the guy.

Freeform NW: *A powerhouse.*

Michael: He has been. And there was Tom Russell, who is the best musician of any of us, in a lot of ways. You know, musically educated. He played lots of horns: flute, saxophones, clarinet, and added a great deal to the group.

Freeform NW: *You know who sings his praises is Calvin Johnson of K records. Tom played on at least one of Calvin's records. He's a great musician.*

Michael: Yeah, great musician. He did some work at Julliard in New York. So yeah, he was definitely ahead of the rest of the band in terms of music materials and basic musicianship. He transcribed a whole lot of music that we played. Excellent transcriptionist. And we had Vincent Soluna playing tenor sax with us who was a powerhouse. Kind of a Gato Babieri-type player. He just added tremendous energy to the group. I'm trying to think who I am leaving out. Of course, Paul Hjelm played guitar. There were about seven of us to begin with and we had a number of different saxophone players when Vince moved back to LA to be with his family. Steve Munger played with us. Steve was a great player. He played with us in a couple of different dances. Jim Pribinow played with us, and Dan Blanc, and later Andie Odie joined the group playing trumpet, and Richard Lowe playing trombone. We expanded to a 10 piece group at that point, which was really great fun. I just loved it.

Freeform NW: *And then you got a singer.*

Michael: Connie Bunyer came to the band in about 1984. That was kind of a transformation for us to, you know, go from being pretty strictly an instrumental group to having vocals in the group too. So yeah, a great deal as we were making a transformation into a Latin dance band, her singing in Spanish was very good.

Freeform NW: *Let's get back into the interview with Michael Moore of the 30-year band Obrador and other things pretty awesome.*

Michael: I guess, you know, maybe the highlight of Obrador was our trip to Havana. You know, playing down there, having a chance to record live. Michael Olson was the driver of the band. He was the guy who made arrangements, who made bookings, who had the energy to put projects together and do all that. He was kind of definitely the glue of the band. And he made arrangements to go to Cuba. He had been there earlier with Jim Pribinow. We got invited to the University of Havana to come and do two concerts which were recorded. I don't know how. I mean it was crazy. All the electrical infrastructure was just so primitive. I mean, these guys were sticking bare wires into the bus board.

Freeform NW: *Yeah?*

Michael: But somehow we got a recording out of that and a pretty good recording. Not bad, not bad you know under the circumstances. When I got a chance to go down the next year with Michael Olson, the two of us went. I went again the next year and we brought down some music technicians that helped fix up instruments at a children's music school we had adopted there and one in Guanabacoa. Those were wonderful trips and I got a chance to play at a really nice jazz club in Havana. I played there with some Cuban musicians. It was a culmination of a lot of years, you know. A really wonderful experience. When the band went down, it was June and it was 108 degrees and about 98 % humidity. We had to kind of force ourselves to get out there. It was so darn hot. We were treated so well by the people down there and they were surprised when we played. We played in the town of Guanabacoa. It is said to be the birthplace of the Santería religion. When we got done playing, we had a meeting with the mayor of the city and some other dignitaries and he said as far as he could remember, we were the first white people to ever play there. Wow. That was pretty amazing to find that out. They were very kind to us. We adopted that music school and ended up sending thousands of dollars of donated instruments down there. It's awesome.

Freeform NW: *It's awesome.*

Michael: The school was for children ages six to 14 and amazingly talented kids.

Freeform NW: *So another thing you guys did is play in prisons in the state of Washington. In fact, you even recorded a whole show on McNeil Island. It was recorded by KAOS FM.*

Michael: That's when it was a federal prison.

Freeform NW: *Tell me what that was like.*

Michael: It was fascinating. We played twice at Walla Walla inside the big walls. We played two in a row. We played in Grand Mound for youth offenders, played in Shelton. Basically, all the prisons and the ongoing joke was that we had a captive audience.

Freeform NW: *Of course.*

Michael: Of course that would come up. It was fascinating especially at McNeil because it was a federal facility at the time and they didn't want us to see any of the inmates. So when we got on stage the

curtain was closed and when we opened it there was pitch black and we couldn't tell if there was anyone out there.

Freeform NW: *That's weird.*

Michael: So we played the first song and at the end of it there was kind of a pause for a second and then an explosion of applause. They were very appreciative. Yeah, that was quite an experience. Walla Walla, boy, was a rough place, let me tell you. You wouldn't want to be there for anything. They hadn't had anybody actually play inside the big walls, you know. They hadn't had anybody play there in about 20 years.

Freeform NW: *Do you remember what got the band to play in prisons?*

Michael: Yeah. Paul Hjelm's wife at the time was involved in some kind of prison advocacy stuff. She's the one who kind of got the ball rolling. Then one thing led to another. I don't think we got paid for any of them.

Freeform NW: *But you got to leave.*

Michael: Yeah. We got to leave.

Freeform NW: *I guess that was in lieu of pay. You made a bunch of albums. We talked a bit about that first album [. . .] Your second album, it was never released, recorded in San Francisco. I think it is a fantastic record. It is one of my favorites, that's for sure.*

Michael: You know, one of the things that happened when I was in Berkeley in 1973 was I was walking around with Vince Soluna the sax player and we heard this music and went up to Provo Park and there was this guy in a wheelchair on a soprano saxophone.

Freeform NW: *Well, could that have been Bert Wilson?*

Michael: Definitely. The band was fantastic. I had a friend down there who was homeless from Great Britain. I told her I heard the saxophone player in the park. This guy was in a wheelchair and he was phenomenal. She said, "Oh, that's Bert Wilson. I know him. You want to meet him?" and I said, "Right now! Yeah." So, she took me over and within a day we were fast friends and I was there every day at his house in Berkeley.

Then in 1976, when we came up here . . .

Freeform NW: *Just for the listening audience who don't know, Bert was confined to a wheelchair from the age of four as a post-polio quadriplegic. He did not let that slow him down.*

Michael: No, no, he was an underground legend, you know. Throughout the United States. All jazz saxophone players knew this guy and his abilities beyond just about any other saxophone player. But anyway, so Bert and I became fast friends and about the time Vince and I came up to Olympia and started Obrador, Bert moved to upstate New York, to Woodstock because there was a scene happening up there. It didn't turn out well for him. He ended up being in a real isolated place out in a remote county in New York. So Lenny Pickett, who's been the Saturday Night Live music director and power player who was one of Bert's students, called me. He said he understood Bert was not doing well up there and I needed to get in touch with him. He put me in touch with Bert who said he was miserable. It was so bad because he was by himself all the time and never played. About that time, Steve went for a visit in New York and went to see Bert. He came back and said, "We gotta get him outta there."

I called Bert and said we wanted to move him out here saying I couldn't guarantee he'd have a whole lot of gigs, but I would guarantee that he would play all the time, every day. So Bert came here in late 1979, took up residence and his house became the hub.

Freeform NW: *Wheels' Pad.*

Michael: You bet. It was just constantly great. Great musicians came through all the time to play.

Freeform NW: *I wasn't in Olympia at that time. I was in Seattle. But from what I can see, he is probably the most influential guy in the Olympia jazz scene.*

Michael: Oh, absolutely. I mean, the people that came to play . . . I was just watching Jeff Coffin on YouTube the other night. He's with Dave Matthews band, and he had a stepson who went to Evergreen. When he came to Olympia he hooked up with Bert. I remember playing at Bert's house and there was a knock at the door. I went to the door and there was an older gentleman there who said, "Hi I'm Roswell Rudd . . . I'd like to play with you guys" You know, it was just constant like that. Chuck Rainey came to Bert's house to play and all the best players in the Northwest. The people who came through . . . Larry Coryell. He and Bert went way back to the 60s together.

Freeform NW: *One of the things as an outside observer is that what I think happened is that he really connected with Chuck Stentz, kind of an earlier generation tenor player here in town. It seemed like they really found common ground.*

Michael: There was a great connection between those two, they became ardent friends. Chuck came to Bert's house every Tuesday to play and they had a band called Bebop Revisited.

Freeform NW: *Right. I've played that on my show.*

Michael: I got signed up and I actually played there a lot on Tuesday nights. Of course when Bert first came here I played in his band for the first half of the year he was here and then Sonny Simmons moved to town.

Freeform NW: *That's a whole different story there.*

Michael: Right. Barbara Donald. You bet. I loved her. Barbara Donald recorded an album. I was in Sonny's band, the American Jungle Music Society for about a year. We did gigs in Seattle and around and I was with Sonny and Barbara. The music was absolutely beautiful. Everything else? A little shaky.

Freeform NW: *Right.*

Michael: Everything else. Then Sonny left and Barbara ended up having some serious health problems and spent most of the rest of her life in a retirement home situation. But she and Bert and Sonny go way back to the 60s.

Freeform NW: *She was a great trumpet player.*

Michael: Absolutely. Wonderful. I played some with Unity as well, her band. Fantastic experiences.

Freeform NW: *So walk me through the rest of the Obrador catalog. You did a record at the Capitol Theater with some Cuban Hip Hop guys. What was that all about?*

Michael: No they were actually Brazilian. Brazilian, rapping in Portuguese. I remember being on stage thinking this is the weirdest take I've ever heard because these guys were rapping up a storm and I can't understand a darn word that they say. Michael set this up. Fato Criminal is the name of that group. It's a pretty cool record. There is some good music on there. There really is. Some of Michael's compositions and Andy Ondall plays exquisite trumpet. It's absolutely beautiful.

Freeform NW: *Yeah, that one was probably the most different. Definitely the outlier of the group.*

Michael: I wonder if that ever made its way to Brazil? That it might get any popularity?

Freeform NW: *The very first thing I ever heard by Obrador I got for one dollar. Now that was the twentieth anniversary recording but at which point Obrador was a full fledged dance band. That's*

when Orador is a Latin dance band.

Michael: Yeah.

Freeform NW: *Who's the guy on the cover?*

Michael: Oh that's a Japanese Buddhist monk who was kind of a very offbeat character in Japan. I think he actually ran for president. Nice, you know, in Japan. We just liked the guy's face so much we put him on there. You know? I think it was Paul Hjelm who did all the artwork for our records. It's interesting, so people came here and somehow met up with Paul. They picked up that CD and turned it over and saw that guy and wondered why he was on the record. There is also a really nice video production Paul put together for the 20-year anniversary where all of us are interviewed and there's music but the copy got corrupted.

Freeform NW: *I haven't seen that on YouTube.*

Michael: It's not on YouTube. Definitely not. In fact, I don't think we have any music on You Tube.

Freeform NW: *Oh you do. Anything that I've put out now is on YouTube.*

Michael: Really?

Freeform NW: *Yeah and any of the Obrador stuff is out there and the whole album is out on Spotify, Apple Music and all that stuff. So you could just go and check that out. I'm not trying to promote the albums. I'm just doing the jazz thing as a community service . . .*

Michael: That covers a lot of years.

Freeform NW: *It does and you are very brisk. You get right to the point. So when we talk about you as a musician, who are your influences that are most important to you? Who are the people you heard that made you think about what you're doing as a musician and where you are going?*

Michael: Well, McCoy Tyner, and definitely Herbie Hancock, Chick Corea and so many others. Don Pullen would be one of my favorite pianists, there's no question about it. Of course you know, Obrador shared the stage with Charles Mingus at the Tye Motor Inn in Tumwater. It's just so bizarre to think of that. (Also Don Cherry at another date.) That was a special treat.

Freeform NW: *Wasn't there something of a dispute over some equipment or something?*

Michael: Yeah, that's a long story.

Freeform NW: *Let's have it! This is a radio show, we like stories.*

Michael: Well, one of the events was one of the soprano saxophones came up missing.

Freeform NW: *Oops.*

Michael: Afterward it turned out to be in the possession of Danny Richmond who was the drummer. From Mingus' band. So we had to go up to Seattle to retrieve it and Charles was not happy about the fact that Danny had taken this instrument, but we got it back. Charles was very gracious and it was just kind of an unusual episode.

Freeform NW: *What was Charles like to play with?*

Michael: He was just as smooth as butter. Just the nicest guy. You know, totally belying the tempestuous reputation he had. No, he was very kind, very complimentary to us. About a year later, we played at the Seattle Concert Theater as the front group for Jack DeJohnette's Directions, with [. . .] and John Abercrombie. Let's see, I guess it was a quartet at the Seattle Concert Theater which has been torn down. On the Denny regrade. It was a beautiful theater.

So we've had the chance to share the stage with some good people. We played a jazz festival on Orcas Island. Bobby McFerrin was the headliner.

Freeform NW: *How far did you guys travel to play? Did you tour the US or just the west coast?*

Michael: No, no, no. Just Washington and Oregon and one trip to San Francisco. We're pretty localized. Except the trip to Cuba.

Freeform NW: *So I'm curious. One of the things since I've come back to Olympia and started doing my homework. I think there are these music scenes in Olympia that are pretty siloed; they don't interact with each other very much. It's like there's a whole folk music scene, there's K records, Kill Rock Stars and the underground scene and the whole jazz scene. I'm curious if you see that the Olympia music scene is that siloed?*

Michael: I've just tried, for myself, to be supportive of all the different kinds of music that are happening. I learned over the years not to dismiss any kind of music. There's always been something here, for everybody. There was Heliotrope for a long time and then No Toy Boys and so many others. There's always been a variety. We've been able to collaborate on concerts at times even though our music is very different. We always interacted and got along well.

Freeform NW: Yeah, well let's see. Everybody knew everybody but they just didn't hang out that much.

Michael: Then you have guys like Steve Bentley that have played with about eight different bands. Over the years people would call him to play and he just said yes, it didn't matter the type of music.

Freeform NW: *I don't know Steve very well but I always thought of him as just a jazz drummer.*

Michael: No, no, no. Steve can play anything and knows all kinds of groups and singers so there has been some overlap.

Freeform NW: *Steve's got some jobs!*

Michael: He's a beautiful brother, for sure.

Freeform NW: *I've appreciated his generosity as I've done my exploring. He's a prince of a guy. Well, is there anything else I haven't asked you that you want to tell me about."*

Michael: What great story we leaving out? I think we've covered just about everything.

Freeform NW: *Those were well-oiled stories for sure.*

Michael: Oh my, yes.