

Saul Stokes

and

Michael Bentley

Live at

The Gatherings Concert Series

25 March 2006 8:00pm

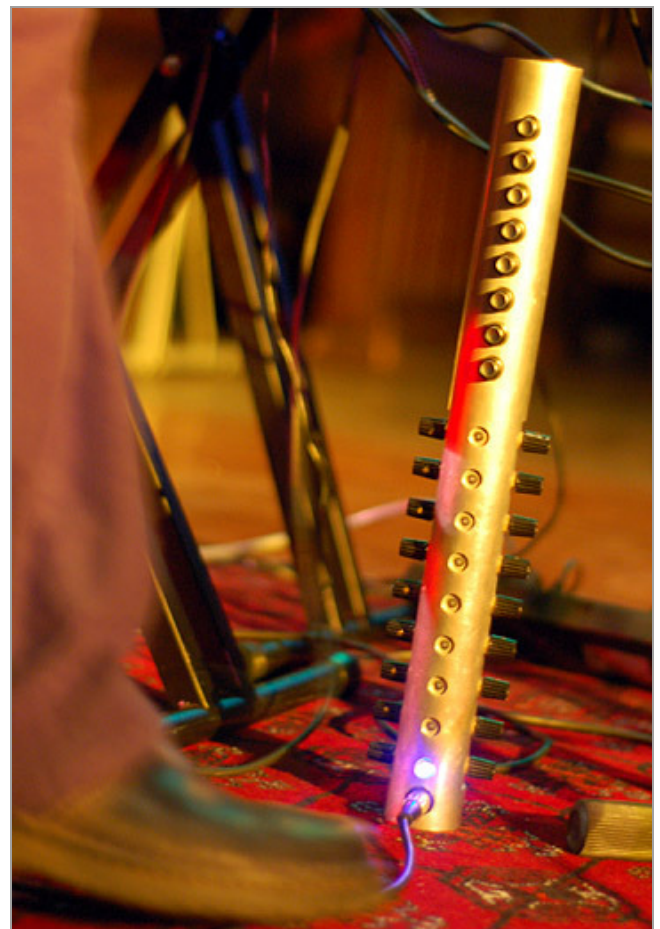
St. Mary's Hamilton Village
3916 Locust Walk in Philadelphia, PA



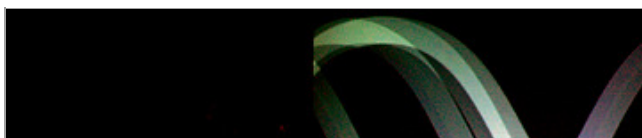
Saul Stokes (Pre-Concert)



Michael Bentley (Pre-Concert)



"Squelch Stick"

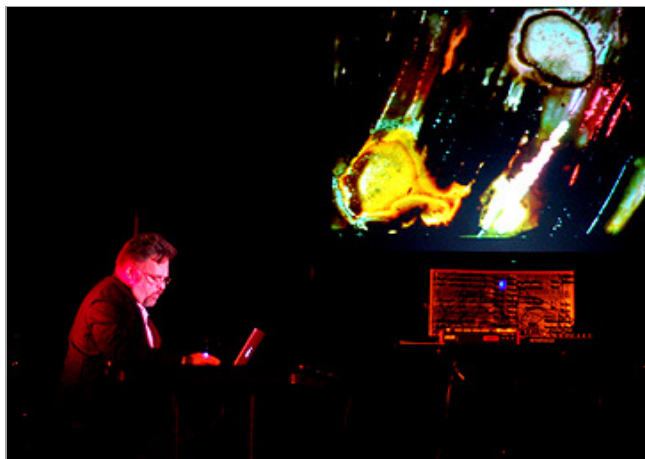


Review: The Gatherings with Saul Stokes and M Bentley

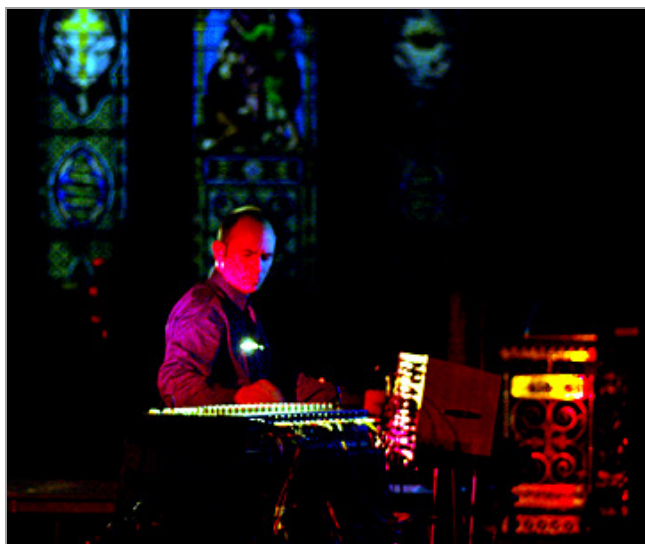
It seems inopportune that my main [blog] post regarding the last weekend revolves around time spent at that awful baby shower. It



Michael Bentley



Michael Bentley



Saul Stokes

is with this in mind that I put on some microscopic electronic music and head into the zone of Saturday night, where I, with my friend John, made the two hour drive down to Philadelphia to attend the sixtieth(!) Gatherings concert, at St. Mary's Church.

This was the fifth Gatherings concert I've managed to attend and I was very excited for I would be seeing the artists Saul Stokes - known for his unusual and dynamic synths, many of which are entirely homemade - and Foundry label owner Michael Bentley. Both make rare appearances on the east coast and I didn't want to miss this one. Michael and I have chatted here and there companionably over the years at the [Hypnos Forum](#) message-board and I was looking forward to popping around and saying hello to everyone, as well as hearing a couple of hours of music in a unique, intimate setting. Looking back, I notice that this is my first Gatherings since 2002, an unexpected lapse, but it's been a busy several years.

The Gatherings are always magical evenings and most of this subtle magic is midwived by the setting, which is the lovely St. Mary's Church on the U Penn campus. There are no hundreds of twenty-two year old hipster kiddies chattering and text-messaging and spilling beers and camphoning and wildly tonguing each other like teenaged rodents. These concerts are held in a reverent space that seems sacred and reserved for those who treat this music as a kind of personal religion without apparent deities. Ambient and electronic music has always been appreciated by a small, devoted audience, as a sacred space for themselves, and the church seems the right place to provide the artists with a resonant area to directly connect with this group. Philadelphia is no New York, which is readily apparent as one walks around the Penn campus, and this lack of arch knowingness and pretense seems to enrich the experience. We're all here to see these musicians and share the love we feel for this strange music, and that's the common air that bathes this globe, if I may plunder Whitman (after all, I had to drive over his bridge to get there).

Michael Bentley's set was first, and, though I was most excited for Saul's set (one of the first neo-ambient artists I was clued into, almost a decade ago), turned out to be the stunning treat of the evening for me.

The lead suite on Bentley's new album, This World was performed, called "Chronos & Kairos." This was a roughly forty minute piece meant as an audio/video presentation with still photography that augmented and aligned with the music played. The few stills I'm posting so far are extracted from the Chronos & Kairos page on the Foundry site and give you an idea of the visuals presented. The piece is a meditation on the ephemeral nature of time and presents a quiet, haunting, and intriguing zone



Saul Stokes



with frequent subtle changes throughout.

Parts reminded me of the gentle DSP manipulations of Donnacha Costello or Mokira with long ambient-drift passages that recalled a warmer and less monolithic Thomas Koner. The photography and the music were beautifully arranged around each other providing the kind of multimedia experience only the live setting can offer. Interestingly, the hushed atmosphere of the Gatherings engendered an even more deep sense of relationship as I listened - if this music and visual mixture had been viewed and heard at a loud uncomfortable NYC bar, the experience would have been far lessened. Indeed, it seems the church forces the audience into a meditative state (and the generally meditative bent of the audience helps, I'm sure), thereby increasing the total effect for all.

I felt a profound sense of time, long-time and short-time, throughout the performance, and remarked to my friend that I hoped it would be available on disc for me to recreate at home (it appears on *This World*, but I didn't know that then). The photography (some particularly striking shots of Hale-Bopp at the end pleased me in the extreme) was always a wonder to behold and I felt the set ended too quickly, the peace I'd fallen into broken abruptly.

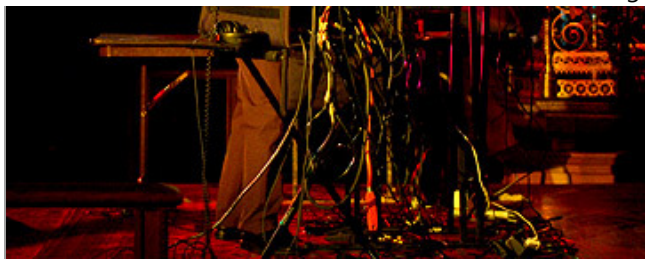
I got the chance to briefly chat with Michael after the set, and quickly bought the *This World* disc, which presents the entire piece. I've since listened to the disc and it's pretty much what I heard at the concert, which I was glad to have such an instant gratification moment for.

After that, I chatted a while with Jeff Kowal, who records as Terra Ambient and runs the new Lotuspik label. I'd not seen him since 2002, I think, so it was nice to catch up for a while and talk a little ambient shop. We sat for Saul Stokes' set and it began in earnest.

I'd expected a set similar to Saul's most recent studio discs, which focused more on rhythmic ambient music that can't quite be called "techno," but isn't not-techno either.

Instead, we were treated to about forty-five minutes of wild, unfettered ambient improv with all sorts of electronic squelches, waveforms, and sine-waves. Occasional drum patterns were hand-triggered, and, Saul, in his dark tie and slacks, seemed to channel both Karl Bartos and Wolfgang Flur from Kraftwerk, as he played. The weird flute-thing he plays, which I have unofficially dubbed the "squelch stick," was in full effect for many minutes. This thing is basically a tube with a bunch of knobs on it that controls the oscillating sounds from the other stuff he has on stage. It's a striking thing to see; a bona fide alien instrument that has no other recognizable purpose but to trigger very bizarre noises. I loved seeing it in action and it's nice to know that it's responsible for some of the most fun parts of Saul records.

Saul's video display was only meant color the music, but I got some neat pictures nevertheless. I like watching guys play around on their laptops during electronic music performances, but I also really dug watching Stokes groove along with the knobs and sliders of his rig up on stage. [I made] two decent [photos] that capture just what a lovely and special atmosphere these nights

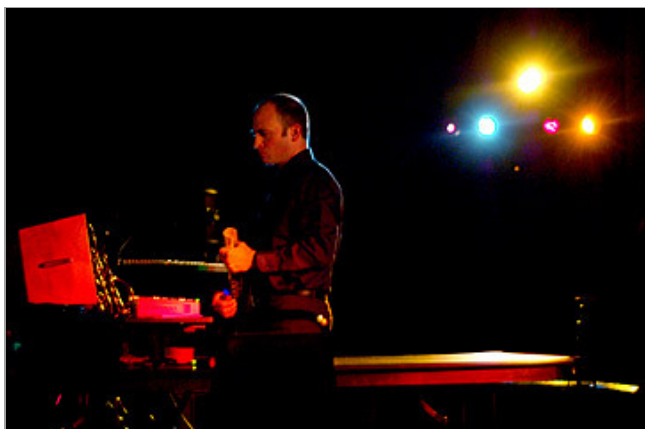


have.

I haven't yet decided if I want to catch [Robert Rich](#), next month, though I do enjoy his new CD *Electric Ladder*. I'm swaying toward yes, but I have to make sure my schedule allows it!

by **Brian Bieniowski**

as posted to [Asphaltden](#) 28 March 2006



Review: Saul Stokes & Michael Bentley

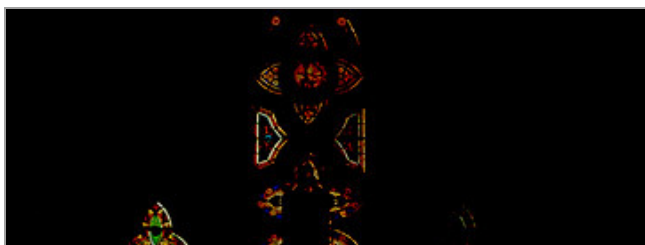
Retrograde to Gatherings Saturday --

Overcast, sprinkles of rain, I'm traveling north toward the City, through Jersey farmlands, the early evening sky offering deference to the forthcoming event. A vast western sun has found the only hole in the sky; this produces a glistening orange glow which transforms the landscape into a world akin to a Michael Bentley-perceived panorama. To see is to believe. Bentley might agree with my calling this "a propitious moment," with a touch of serendipity tossed in.



Saturday night was indeed the opportunity to see two fine performances, one by Michael Bentley and the other by Saul Stokes. This date marked the return to Philadelphia for Stokes, as he was here to perform his third concert for The Gatherings series. Several years ago, Stokes resided in the city. Those were the days when any area fan of this musician, one such as I, could be found hot on his trail-- at previous Gatherings, Gate to Moon Base Alphas, Fringe Festivals in the Olde City, etc. -- witnessing the emergence of an experimental soundcraftsman into a talent incredibly special.

Most of us know by now that Stokes hand-makes many of his own instruments; these in turn create an original, signature sound, which are then constructed into aural images that blow a listener's mind. Never does Stokes push the edge with these sounds more than during a live performance. He did bring a new studio release to town this past week: he's named it "Vast." It's a whopper. This CD takes the years (and years) of Stokes' development and hones these into perfection. But, when live, it's a whole new ball game. One is led to wonder how much of his live material is improvised, and how much planned. More of the former is suspected here. Even Stokes himself has admitted reaching stages in his live sets where he becomes concerned about being able to reel things back in. Not to fear -- as we witnessed Saturday night, even though the artist robustly simmered, crackled, and squelched his way to the precipice -- he safely returned us home. Stokes is also learning that his listeners enjoy his highly experimental forays, and his cunning ability to simultaneously create chaos and euphoria.



Foundry-king Michael Bentley opened for Stokes. Bentley has also recently launched a release on Foundry (Stokes' "Vast" is on Foundry, as well) called "This World." Deeply expressive in style, Bentley's set was a reproduction of the better portion of this new CD -- a piece titled "Chronos & Kairos." This music would turn out to be a stark contrast (yet a fine complement) to what Stokes would next offer. In all the electronic-music concerts I've

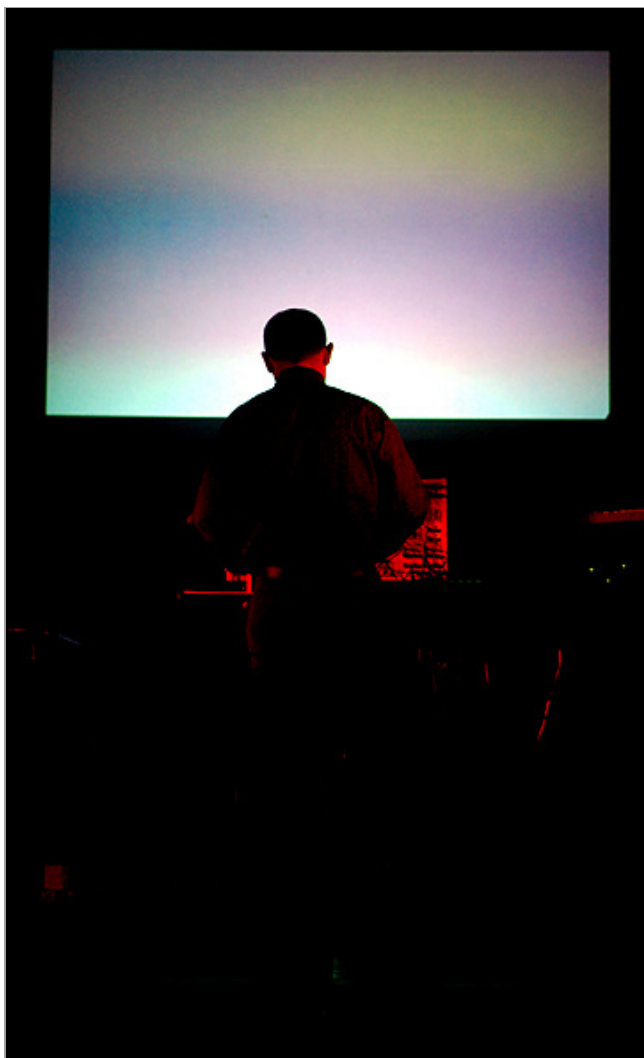


attended, I don't think I have ever heard an artist effectively use silence the way Bentley did. The effect was profound, but hard to describe. The air at St. Mary's seemed to be swallowed into nothingness. Timelessness? Bentley wrote "Chronos & Kairos" with time as its theme, or a Greek definition of such. From the liner notes of the CD (and Bentley gave a brief explanation of this theme after his set), "Kairos was considered the time of opportunity, the propitious moment, and chronos was eternal time, what we might call the long haul." The beautiful piece does periodically "emerge," offering subtle emotional impact. Combine these moments with the also-Bentley-produced imagery provided on a stage screen, and I was drawing comparisons to the music/imagery produced by Michael Stearns, but with Bentley being at quarter-speed in velocity. I loved the low gear.

After The Gatherings sets were completed, volunteer responsibilities were divided; some drove gear back to host Chuck van Zyl's house; a few, including Stokes, loaded and took gear to the WXPN studio in order to prepare for Saul's live [STAR'S END](#) radio concert; two, a friend I'd met this very night (he flew all the way from Finland to see Saul play!) and I went to a local pizzeria in order to feed all concerned back at the radio studio. In the process of this, all suffered a cold shower from the rain.

But as 2am neared all were dry, warm, fed, and settled in; Saul kicked off his shoes and requested the lights be dimmed -- it was almost pitch black -- the hour finally topped, and the cue came from across the hall. "On the air." Listen. More simmering, crackling, occasional squelching, but not quite as we'd heard earlier at the beautiful church. The fire had faded somewhat; serene, quieter experimentation the rule. I took in the hour from over the artist's left shoulder, far enough away not to disturb, but watching every knob-twist and lever-slide, savoring the sounds these produced.

by [soma611](#) as posted to the [Spacemusic List](#) (#10458) 1 April 2006

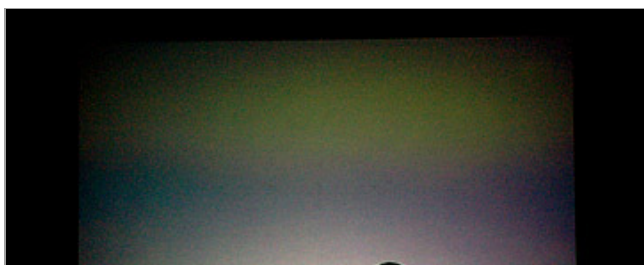


Review: The Gatherings with Saul Stokes and M Bentley

Safely back home in Helsinki, I now want to put in a few comments about The Gatherings, and to send a big Thank You to Chuck van Zyl for organizing the event! The St Mary's church was an excellent venue with a nice open ambience. And as Brian B. commented in his blog, the venue offered an intimate atmosphere. The music of Michael Bentley was a new experience for me. His CD "This World" has since then spent many revolutions in my portable CD-player during this trip.

There is a big challenge to present music that is so very minimal at a live concert. I think it was a brave and impressive effort, and the music was helped by a beautiful visual presentation. Never the less I felt that M.B. did not capitalize on the sonic possibilities at the event. As an example the stereo field of the performance was very narrow.

Saul Stokes' part of the concert turned out to be more than I could have hoped for. Even if I appreciate his new CD "Vast", on





which the concert apparently was loosely based, I am way more fond of his more experimental work. His best CD to date -- IMHO -- is "Radiate", which happens to be a live recording. Could it be that these improvised live events brings out a more courageous side of him?

In the midst of those experimental sounds it was a swingful performance with varied rhythms coming in and going out of focus. Most of all I loved those strong analogue sounds; like wild horses rearing, only to be pulled down by this brave artist just before flipping over...

Notice Saul Stokes' gear for this concert: no keyboard! Sounds were triggered by the touchpads on the little red Akai MPC1000 sampler in front. Other instruments was the small blue Evolver by Dave Smith Instruments, and two home-made analogue instruments.

[Obligatory educational flick: There was a mention that they didn't hear me speak Finnish. Well, Finland is a bilingual country, and I happen to belong to the Swedish speaking minority]

by **Jussi Piekkala** as posted to the [Hypnos Forum](#) 31 March 2006



Saul Stokes

Review Saul Stokes & M Bentley at The Gatherings

It was a Saturday night and I had my head bowed over a bowl of tortilla soup on the back steps of a church. With a great dizzying rush, I had just seen spring come slamming back into my life. I ran through University City, past blooming trees and leggy

Penn girls wearing the shortest of shorts. Drizzling rain churned up the smell of fresh new earth and soggy pavement. In the next moment, I was ducking through the red doors of St. Mary's, taping wires and hoisting lights, holding my breath during sound check. Then the doors opened and I watched familiar faces come blowing in from the rain - Bill Beck, river pirates Warren and Mitch, old roommate Vincent, Chuck Nixon, Cyndi Lee Rule, Ben Fleury-Steiner and many others. Pillows, blankets, folding chairs, all came loping through the vestibules attached to their respective owners. All at once, everyone was inside, and I realized how fiendishly hungry I was, and how cold it had gotten outside. I dashed through the rain to find the soup, came back to hear applause from inside the sanctuary, and with my first sip, the Gatherings was happily back for 2006.

The soup wasn't the only thing that warmed this evening. A low hum and the gentle ticking of a clock ushered in the music of Michael Bentley, owner of the Foundry label and general Renaissance man. Lit by his laptop screen, he opened the night with forty minutes of slow-paced, minimal music that held the audience in thrall. The screen above his head visualized the subtleties of the unfolding piece - a clock face ticked behind a giant sine wave as a bass pulse came into the mix. Heavily treated digital sections gave way to long stretches of simple warmth, lulling everyone in the church into pin-drop quietness. The sheer silence of the church was astounding. Someone coughed, and it seemed like a gunshot. The trickle of rain on the windows, the creaking and hissing of the radiators, the shuffling of people's feet in the back, all combined to enmesh Michael's music with the church's surroundings and create a highly meditative stretch of time. So meditative, in fact, that some people seemed too scared to even move - when the music thinned down to one last tiny drone, there was relief in the form of a cacophony of creaking pews. After the applause, people milled about peacefully, very much relaxed by the first course of the night. Michael mingled happily with the crowd and a gaggle of folks retreated into the rain to smoke and reflect.

Then, with great anticipation, I paced while Chuck introduced Saul Stokes to the audience. Again, the room held its breath while the man stood in front of his gear: a handmade modular synthesizer, an Akai sample pad, and his iconic instrument: a strange metal tube covered with buttons. Raising his arms with his back to us, he opened with a wonderful warm trill of sound, and then another and another, piling sound on sound. Moving faders in and out seemingly at random, he still showed a wonderful focus to his motions, a slow gymnastics routine played out with two hands. He would push an unearthly squelch to the front of the mix, and then just as suddenly, rein it in while manipulating it down to a pastoral hum. I couldn't tell how long it had been. Maybe two minutes? Yet already, the church was lit up with sound, a huge breathing lattice, with Saul at the middle of it. Standing stock-still at the back of the church, I realized my legs had suddenly fallen asleep. Chuck leaned over to me as Saul picked up the tube and told me excitedly, "See, eight buttons, one octave. And he tunes it while he plays it." A fluttering melody dropped into the mix, pitching up and down while Saul tweaked his handmade synth and hobbled on and off a small floor pedal. Chuck's words snapped me back into normal time. I thought it must have been at least forty-five minutes already, but looking at my watch, I saw that it had only been fifteen.

Saul's music continued on, and I reflected on the way it sounds if disassembled. Each thread of sound he made conjured up strange analogues - a humming motor turning into a garbage disposal, which turned into a car alarm, and then a warbling flute or a steaming kettle. But it was Saul's talent to make a musical Magic Eye puzzle - when stepping back with one's ears, and relaxing a bit, you could hear innovative music in its most raw form. This relaxation spread through the audience as Saul took the music to a bright peak and then a quiet lull. Putting down the tube and tapping the sample pad, a sparse rhythm began to play. Now he took to it with both hands and drummed out a rhythm that called to mind his classic album "Outfolding", making the music tumble forward with quiet urgency. If the first fifteen minutes of the show seemed like forty-five, the next hour seemed like five. I got lost in time, moving around in wonder and delight at the back of the sanctuary. Every new crease of analogue sound seemed to fall in place with the rest of them, like tumblers in a lock. Moods melted into each other with the introduction of new timbres and the ebb and flow of minimal rhythmic elements from the sampler. Talking to Saul a little bit later in the night, he expressed concern that sometimes his music seems to feel a little bit out of his control, especially when conjured up in front of a church full of people. To watch and listen, one had to wonder how much pre-planning could really go into this kind of music, which sounded at times large and frightening, living on its own. And yet, that makes for the essence of real art - unique and unrepeatably, and bigger than life, once it leaves the hands of the person who made it.

Before I knew it, there was applause, and the trance was broken. Copies of Saul's newest album, "Vast", were snapped up off the merch table at incalculable speed. With all the hands staying on board after the show, the equipment was broken down in the blink of an eye. I got to meet and chat with Jussi, who flew in from Finland to see the show, earning him the title of most dedicated Gatherings roadtripper. Saul was humbled by Jussi and the legions of people who mobbed him after the show, pressing him with praise and looking reverently at his gear. Then the cars were loaded up; Saul dashed out into the rain, throwing his jacket over his modular to keep it dry. The evening continued soon after at WXPN, with pizza and soda to grease the wheels (thanks to Mr Beck!). Saul was wonderfully candid with everyone, funny and real, watching us orbit around his setup and make random conversation. Jussi hovered at the periphery with his camera, taking picture after picture, quietly chatting with people in perfect English. At 2 AM the [STAR'S END](#) radio portion of the evening kicked in, with Saul calling up another hour from within his magic box. This time ideas were looser and a little more abstract, but the overall sound was still deep and quieting. Saul thinned his lips in deep thought once or twice, but he didn't stop having fun. "Whoa, did you hear that?" he remarked to us all, turning a

knob up and down, creating a head-spinning squelch of sound. He grinned and we egged him on; he happily turned the knob another ten or twelve times. Drawing to a close an hour later, Saul took his time packing up, continuing to chat and joke around until nearly 5 AM before slipping into the alleyway.

In summing up the experience, I can only think back to the first time I heard Stokes' music up close, listening to "Abstraction" on a late spring afternoon. I fulfilled my role as a lazy college kid that day by opening all the windows and promptly falling asleep while the CD spun. Waking up some time later, in the midst of the music, I remember padding out into the hallway and feeling the air on my face. A thunderstorm was rolling in. Shivering, humid puffs of winds came rolling in from all the windows, from the back of the apartment to the front, with Saul matching every gust. It struck me then, all at once, what a perfect moment it was, the music fitting right into that languid pocket of springtime heat, the grumble of tires on the street, the humming of the air from the coming storm. While at the same time showing himself to be a real person, friendly and soft-spoken, Saul also showed us his role as a conjurer of wonderful atmospheric sound. And that was his conjurer's trick for the weekend: stringing us all, with delicious tension, across a vibrating wire stretched from west coast to east.

by **Scott Kelly** ([DJ Kel](#)) 5 April 2006

Concert Photos by Jeff Towne

For more about **Saul Stokes**, please access the:

- Official Website: <http://www.saulstokes.com>
- Foundry Website: <http://www.foundrysite.com/stokes>
- Hypnos Website: <http://www.hypnos.com>
- Saul Stokes STAR'S END Profile at: <http://www.starsend.org/stokes.html>
- Photos and Reviews of **Saul Stokes** live at **The Gatherings Concert Series** in Philadelphia on [17 December 1998](#)
- Photos and Reviews of **Saul Stokes** live at **The Gatherings Concert Series** in Philadelphia on [4 March 2000](#)
- Concert Announcement for **Saul Stokes** live at **The Gatherings Concert Series** in Philadelphia on [18 April 2009](#)

For more about **Michael Bentley**, please access the:

- Official Website: <http://www.foundrysite.com/bentley>

The Gatherings Concert Series is presented by the all-volunteer staff of The Corporation for Innovative Music and Arts of Pennsylvania

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