

Biplane: Album Review and Interview with Michael Broderick

Collin Bright and Casey Zukosky w/ Michael Broderick



Biplane Album Cover by Josh Conrad – excerpted from *Biplane* with permission from Michael Broderick.

Don't Fly Too High

Feelings of grief, anticipation, and the ache of impending loss course through Michael L. Broderick's album, *Biplane*¹, tracing a tender, tonal pathway through the echoes of what we hold dear and fear losing. Released via Bandcamp on September 29th, 2024, *Biplane* is a 15-track conceptual album headed by Michael, co-produced by Michael Elliot, with collaborations with over 30 artists, mainly

¹ The *Biplane* project is featured in *Liminalities* 20.4 (2024). The album can be streamed on Bandcamp: <https://aquabearlegion.bandcamp.com/album/biplane>

his family, friends, and friends of friends. Sonically, *Biplane*'s construction reflects Michael's roots in post-industrial Southwestern Ohio, drawing on a post-genre soundscape that oscillates between the ethereal and the metallurgical, channeling the layered vibrance and decay of rural Appalachia. As both a work of art and a form of academic inquiry, *Biplane* situates itself within an ongoing dialogue across the arts and across time, resonating with the emotional lyricism of artists like Bob Dylan, Neil Young, and others, while theoretically wrestling with the boundaries and vanguards of performance studies.

Between the drives home to spend time with his mom, forest explorations in search of mushrooms, hanging with his kids, cold sips of the Appalachia's finest IPA's, and archiving the ruins and restorations of a place/space that once upon a time was a place he called home, Michael took some time to answer a few questions on July 8, 2025, about *Biplane*; specifically, concerning the LP's aesthetic and study of grief. He remarks that he has been in a constant state of bereavement since 2021, expressly due to the passing of his father, "Coach," on June 5, 2021. Shortly after the loss of his father, while working on a single broadsheet printed poem, titled "Weariness of Flight," Michael's close friend suffered a stroke. And, tragically, the heartaches would continue as in the summer of 2023, Michael's mother, Kathleen, was diagnosed with terminal cancer, leading him to conceive of *Biplane* as the final form of *Weariness*; a sentimental gift, a "love letter," addressed to his mother.

Collin Bright is a media and cultural theorist, writer, and PhD student in the Department of Communication at The University of Utah. His research critically engages with contemporary Black aesthetics and expressions to better understand how they affirm, disrupt, and transform social relations of power.

Michael Broderick: When not walking through old graveyards, or collecting wild edibles in the woods of greater Appalachia, I am an Associate Professor of Culture and Ecology at James Madison University in the Shenandoah Valley. My areas of interest include critical approaches to food and culture, narrative and storytelling, post-humanisms and new materialisms, material ecology, vibrant matter assemblages, and aesthetic and performative approaches to understand our shared social world. You can find some of my most recent work in *Qualitative Inquiry*, *Text and Performance Quarterly*, and *Liminalities*. Please feel free to reach out: broderml@jmu.edu.

Casey Zukosky is a musician and independent scholar, having recently graduated and received his Master's from the Department of Communication at the University of Utah.

During the interview, there is a shift in tone whenever Michael veers from discussing the aesthetic of *Biplane* to the inspiration behind it. He often pauses and gets lost in the questions, looking off into the distance, potentially chasing fleeing memories that grow faster as the days pass. Alternatively, he may be imagining an inevitable heartbreak that he is well aware is promised in the distant future. When he snaps back into his body, he begins to talk affably and passionately about his debut, the process of doing his best Phil Jackson impersonation as he assembled 30-plus hyper-talented artists to produce a '90s-era Bulls run. Though he admits that at times it was a headache. "These folks do not have home studios; they are just fucking amazing musicians," he opines.

Biplane was produced primarily through digital audio workstations, Gmail file shares, and other forms of vernacular tech (Bright & Broderick, 2024), culminating in an eclectic yet enigmatic soundscape. The album reaches its zenith within its folk simplicity, which, at times, is abandoned too quickly in favor of the messiness of attempting to converge a multitude of genres into a single record. See, for instance, Justin Gordon's sultry strings on "Wren," melting effortlessly with his vocals, or Michael's cough mutating into a lethargic count to intro "Each Morning," or when creatures of the night croon in the backdrop of Michael and featured vocalist Michelle Huh's spoken-word duet on "Before the Gray." On the other hand, however, records like "Dog Days" struggle to bridge the album's ever apparent, and quite intentional, genre and affective distortion as Michael's spoken word – detailing a blistering summer in Ohio – is mixed poorly and drowned by the experimental rock production of guitarist and bassist Bill Wagner and Will Foster. His vocals become fleeting, static transmissions, lost within the delivery of the album's message, which, when considered in light of the album's telos, paints an audio image of the inexplicability of grief.

But this logic, that *Biplane* is both an LP and a form of scholarship, leads to the primary gripe that arose, fairly often, in our review of the album. Does this one-foot-in-one-foot-out positioning give *Biplane* a free pass to avoid aesthetic or scholastic critique? And, if the answer is no, what form does this review take? It is a question that both art and academia must answer. As a piece of art, impressions of Bob Dylan's "The Freewheelin'," Zac Bryan's "Fear and Friday's (poem)," and Donald Glover's "3.15.20" [reissued as *Atavista* in 2024] break through *Biplane*'s enigmatic soundscape. The latter is an exemplary comparison as both, in terms of their post-genre praxis and thematic exploration of swimming, floating, and drowning in grief, share a commitment to sonically producing a heartbreaking degree of vulnerability. For those unfamiliar with Glover's fourth

LP, released via donaldgloverpresents.com on March 15, 2020, it is what he describes as “A punk thing,” going against the music industry’s status quo (Skeleton, 2023) of traditional features – e.g., evocative album covers and, on a lesser scale, lacking titles for the records. (Biasedly, we think the nameless records give “3.15.20” a nostalgic, quasi DatPiff and Limewire ethos.)

Biplane exudes a similar degree of “punkness,” or what Michael describes as an answer to an annoyance, emerging in his devout rejection of “The idea of doing scholarship *with* artistic elements, rather than doing ‘art.’” Still, it is crucial to note that this punkness is a secondary occurrence, manifesting through the academy’s all-seeing, all-controlling, all-exploiting eye. Remember, *Biplane* was not crafted as a form of scholarship with artistic components, but an album fully conceived and fleshed as a piece of art that did not strive for academic approval. It just so happened to get housed later on through *Liminalities*.

Don't Fly Too Low

When Michael began calling in favors to his musician homies following Kathleen’s terminal diagnosis in 2023, the only goal was that the album would be finished and delivered to his mother before she passed.

CB: Was there a concerted effort to get your mom on the album?

MB: I asked her if she would like to participate, and she did, and she was really excited about it. If she were not, there is no way in hell as I am incredibly protective of her... I am glad I did, it is the single best piece on the album.

The aforementioned record, “Vivian in Blue,” is beautifully haunting. Kathleen poignantly details the trauma that comprised her childhood and beyond after her mother “Was admitted into Miami Valley Hospital in Dayton, Ohio, where she died of ovarian cancer just before her 38th birthday” (Broderick et. al, 2024, para. 5). She paints scenes of her father’s psychosis, recounts her mother’s voice whispering sweet melodies in her dreams of them reuniting in heaven, as well as her time in the church with her younger sister. “We were told stories about a God who rose from the dead,” Kathleen remarks on “Vivian in Blue,” “I always secretly hoped that the folks who ain't God could rise, too.”

“Vivian in Blue” is Kathleen signing her love letter, gently reminding us that we never experience memory as fixed or isolated—it always arises in relation,

shaped through art, through others, and across time, as Robert R. Arichbald (2002) asserts. Remembering love as an emotion, as an action entwined with grief, is not passive, but it can be something we do with others, across time, through art and sound. In *Biplane*, this co-creation, this being united in grief through love and loss, becomes a relational world-making in which grief and presence resonate concurrently back toward love. The accentuation of (re)producing love within the face of death via the co-collaborative vignettes, voices, and spirits living forever within the 15 tracks, is an aesthetic tenet of *Biplane* that is one of the more prominent choices by Michael and company. This love, per Michael, arose from the adherence to the aesthetic.

MB: If we attend to the aesthetic, we can then make the case for it being 'scholarship' without compromising the aesthetic value. However, as soon as you start with the implication that what you are doing is some scholarship and including in that scholarship with all the fucking residue of what scholarship looks like, artistic elements, you do not have art.

CB: Well, with that said, how do you, as the architect of the album, conceptualize the importance and implications of performance concerning *Biplane*?

MB: I feel like my answer, especially for those in performance studies, would be unsatisfactory. I am not formally trained in performance. It is not my background. I have always done, and continue to do, more creative work. In other words, they 'house me.' They allow me a space, and I am eternally grateful for that. But there is also something about the ex-Irish catholic kid in me in that I am fucking suspicious of labels and suspicious of getting put in boxes.

This tension and resistance to conceptualizing *Biplane* as neatly housed within performance studies is one that Michael is headstrong about. He is transparent about not considering himself a performance scholar, as he does not want to speak with the same fervor as he does in ethnographic (specific), environment, or food communication contexts. Still, in his commitment to lead with the aesthetic came the emergence of what D. Soyini Madison (2007) describes as co-performative witnessing, "to live in and spend time in the borderlands of contested identities where you speak 'with' not 'to' others and where your (and their) ethnographic interlocutors are as co-temporal in the report and on stage as they were in the field" (p. 828). Michael admits this was not a planned feature of the LP. Yet, it

bore as a byproduct of people bringing their understanding, experience(s), and relationship with grief to the forefront through their common language of music.

Thus, *Biplane* can be heard as a response to academia's infatuation with scriptocentrism, the belief in writing as the primary form of language. Indeed, Michael notes, to begin to think of *Biplane* as a form of scholarship, as a sonic representation of the process of co-performative witnessing immersed within 15 tracks, one should come to the table with headphones and not a pen and pad. This is not to say that written form is not meaningful to him, but that he feels it reads, at times, as exclusionary and lacking (potential) substance. The central artistic belief around *Biplane* echoes more closely to Madison's (2007) contention that "Soundscapes are illuminated, coalesced, and most effectively politicized through cultural performances" (p. 829). And if this is the case, he believes it lends more credence to the idea that *Biplane* is an explosive form of scholarship, well-equipped to provoke uncomfortable conversations about academia's insistence on (re)producing and (re)affirming scholastic norms.

CB: Can you walk me through your thought process behind *why* an album was the chosen medium for *Biplane*?

MB: Think of that written script. That five fucking act play, traditional monograph as a piece of architecture. Bones of a structure. And then you have a more traditional – [there is a momentary pause] – I am going to say this, but I do not know if I really mean this. I'd almost rather read a traditional fucking social scientific monograph than an autoethnographic text that uses that same architecture and puts in elements of aesthetics, a little seasoning, a little salt, a little pepper here, but you have the same bones. You have the same structure, you have not blown up the structure to make something different. You are not demolishing the house; you are redecorating.

CB: How would you describe how the album affects the architecture?

MB: *Biplane* blows up the structure. Where is my introduction? Where is my abstract? Where is my theory? Where is my method? Where is my lit review? And this is not to say that others have not attempted to blow up the structure, as I know I am not the first, but what I am saying is that [those leading with scholastic framing before the aesthetic] appear as academic treatises who are loaded with power relationships and are unwilling to relinquish those power relations as they continue to frame their work in approximation to "T"ruth. Art already does the heavy academic lifting of

identity and investigating salient features of our shared social world. It is baked into the aesthetic work. The opposite is not true. Aesthetic work is not a feature of traditional academic writing and doesn't become an aesthetic investigation by adding artistic flourishes.

His tonality heightens as the source of his agitation is revealed: the field of Communication, which he identifies as poking and prodding scrupulously at "work" that finds itself stretching beyond the scope of traditional work.

MB: If you put together a book of poems in the English department, they will say, "You just did scholarship." You do not have to write extra elements explaining why your poems are scholarship, as it is understood within the space in which you publish. It is just folks in Communication who have a more traditional approach, which, in the end, narrows the scope of possibility and what we are able to experience. What is grief? *Biplane* is a meditation on death and dying, what is beautiful amidst suffering and grief. Undoubtedly, you could do a survey or write a social scientific study of the stages of grief and most certainly discover another way of conceptualizing grief. But it is not the same as constructing a piece of art that immerses people beyond the written form. Every form of the soundscape dips into the universal pool of what it means to lose.

Caught in the Current

When vocalist Caitlin Kraus crooned, "You haven't left yet. But someday you will. In the end it can all go so quickly" on "Rose," Kraus spoke to the album's wrestling with the ambiguity of bereavement and its relational effects. Throughout the album, Michael and company conceptualize grief not as an emotion but as a performance of the absence of love. Still, in the same breath, they ask us to consider grief as a practice of presence, binding the living to the lost through performance, shared memories, and intimacy of sound. Oscillating between denial and acceptance, *Biplane* ostensibly echoes Jacques Attali's (2009) eloquent proclamation: "For twenty-five centuries, Western knowledge has tried to look upon the world. It has failed to understand that the world is not for the beholding. It is for the hearing. It is not legible, but audible" (p. 3). But how do we begin transcribing, critiquing, or reviewing the audibility of a co-creative sonic plane through an institutional lens that favors sight over sound? Should its aesthetic

principles be critiqued as seen in the above *Too High* section, or should the onus be placed on its theoretical/methodological underpinning as observed in *Too Low*?

The answer to these questions arises by centering the senses, expressly hearing, attuning to the affective waves, hymns, screams, quiet, heat, and rush that grief may pull to the surface. One can write of the cold ice cream burning the roof of their mouth as tears rain down their face, or maybe the weight of their orbital rim from the eyes' puffiness, too, is okay. *Biplane* attempts to demonstrate that maybe – just maybe – attuning to the sounds of grief manifests as a form of *audiophrenia*, converging and distorting sounds as reflections of an unexplainable phenomenon. Voices choking and craking; crickets chirping; inaudible voices that never become clear, no matter how hard one tries to decipher the tone; echoes of voices panning between the scape; these, too, are illustrations of grief.



Almost a year removed from *Biplane's* release, some things have changed for Michael, like his grown-out beard and a new home, while others have stayed the same. The latter, specifically, is the new current of grief that found its way to Michael's shore. *Biplane's* outro, "Will You Miss Me," which was once a question encapsulating the looping, often nonlinear experience of mourning, has become a daunting reminder of life's unpredictability. Returning to a place of stripped-down vulnerability on the outro, a tiny, distant, and distorted voice asks:

Perhaps you'll plant a flower
On my poor, unworthy grave
Come and sit along beside me
When the roses nod and wave.

(Broderick, 2024, stanza 1)

"Will you miss me when I'm gone?" is called back and forth, not as a plea for reassurance, but as something soft and uncertain. As a more somber way of asking whether love endures, the question lingers, tender and unresolved. Like a headstone without a date and a distant memory still near. This is how Michael sees his current understanding of *Biplane* due to the passing of his brother Timothy on May 8, 2025, from pancreatic cancer.

MB: In some ways. After I finished the album, I felt good about it and what it said about grief, my grief, and this thing we all share. And then, my brother got sick and died and rocked my fucking world. The album did not feel so cute to me anymore because the loss was so quick, so devastating that, in some ways, it does not quite approximate... My brother's death was so explosive and so large that some parts of that album felt trite to me. I went back and listened today, before we met, and I felt a little better about it. Especially the parts about my mom reading. I felt like those parts were more fitting. *Biplane* opened my heart to tremendous sorrow, but it also opened it up to tremendous beauty. I do not think I understood that. In some ways, the album is an expression of pain and beauty, which is why I brought in some of the Duende stuff in the beginning. You do not get beauty without death.

CB: The two go hand-in-hand.

MB: They go hand-in-hand. I always thought grief was about a person, but I am coming to understand that it is an essential quality of being. I do not grieve; we grieve. We are a second away from all of it, if not immersed within it ourselves... [Grief] throws you into a universal pool of community and communion with others.

Post-Script

Biplane is not the first album to explore grief (e.g., *Atavista*) nor the first album to find a home in and out of the academy (e.g., A.D. Carson's (2024) dissertation cum album *Owning My Masters (Mastereð)*). Still, its diunital existence positions the album within a broader conversation in performance studies. *Biplane* appears as an affective and audible rollercoaster, as grieving is not easily measured or arranged by rationalistic epistemological principles, nor does it appear pristine like a Jack Antonoff production. Instead, grief appears enigmatic, "Awash in last color. Before the gray," across *Biplane*. Kathleen Stewart (2010) may call this dwindling, this absorption, within the gray, an act of atmospheric attunement; Donald Glover (2020) may describe it as attempting to swim in a standing ocean. For Michael and the featured musicians across the LP, in the end, it is attempting to capture the often inner turmoil of waiting for loss to arrive.

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