

# NARADA MICHAEL WALDEN

## Drumming, Spirit and Music

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and Remo drumheads.

Aubrey Dayle would like to thank Sonor drums, Dream cymbals, and Vic  
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### **VIDEO CONTENT INCLUDED**

This icon indicates a video to accompany the material.

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# **BIOGRAPHY**



# Introduction

**T**here are moments in one's life when one begins a series of small repetitive undertakings with self-improvement in mind. After a while, and with some powerful external influences, one can suddenly find oneself involved in a much larger endeavor. That tiny spark of inspiration catches fire to become something much more significant than you initially expected. This phenomenon happened to me in spades, resulting in the writing of this book on the drumming and musical mastery of Narada Michael Walden.

It all started very innocently. In 2019 I was transcribing drum set performance segments that I love from some of my favorite drummers. I then learned to play the parts and showcased them along with drum lessons I created for my YouTube channel. This activity increased substantially during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The lockdown suddenly opened up a great deal of extra time for me to study all those grooves, fills, and solos I've listened to over the years that I never seemed to get around to checking out more closely. One of those transcriptions was of a song on the Mahavishnu Orchestra album *Visions of the Emerald Beyond* called "Cosmic Strut." I transcribed it and learned the whole piece, made a video of me playing the transcription along with the Mahavishnu Orchestra recording, and put together a lesson highlighting the interesting drum set elements I found in the song. I then posted the video on my YouTube channel. Mission accomplished. Right?

Well, not quite.

It turns out that Grant Calvin Weston, an incredible drummer, musician, and a very good friend of mine from Philadelphia, saw the video and forwarded the link to Narada Michael Walden! One thing led to another, and before I knew it, I found an email from Narada in my inbox. I understand that some of you will see what I'm about to write as somewhat new age or mystical, but when I opened the email, I felt a rush of spiritual positivity. It wasn't just

the kind words Narada wrote about my work on "Cosmic Strut," but I could tell the email came from someone willing to show spiritual love to all ready to receive it. I told you it was going to sound mystical! The next day I was on the phone with one of my drumming heroes, and I could see then that I had gained a new friend and found myself behind the scenes of the musical portion of Narada Michael Walden's life. He confirmed how I felt about him during that phone call and subsequent Zoom sessions. Narada is always dressed to the



*Aubrey Dayle and Narada Michael Walden.*

nines, beaming with positivity, and talks fast with excitement. He reminds me of a teenager discovering something special for the first time, except everything he says and how he carries himself demonstrates experience and wisdom. I am very grateful to Calvin for connecting me with Narada. It set me on a path of discovery as I dug into this master musician's drumming, career, and artistry.

I spent several months painstakingly transcribing drum performances of 12 recorded pieces of music that represent significant periods in Narada's career. He also was very generous with his time on phone calls and Zoom sessions to give me

the details of his career and the circumstances surrounding him and his colleagues while creating each piece in this book.

For those who want to dig into Narada's playing, I have included accompanying exercises to some key drumming elements in the songs. I encourage you to work on the exercises and play as many transcriptions as possible. This book is not a method book with a focus on technique. However, some transcriptions and exercises are challenging and will inspire you to seek information from other sources on how to attain the necessary speed, movement, and articulation to play them. It is more of a book that can give insight into how Narada Michael Walden thinks as a drummer and add to your drumming comprehension and vocabulary.

Narada Michael Walden has been at the highest level in the music business as a drummer, in a sideman capacity and a leader, and he is one of the

world's greatest producers. During his nearly fifty-year professional career, he has been at the center of writing and producing hit songs for many artists such as Whitney Houston and Aretha Franklin. He also wrote music and played drums for instrumentalists like John McLaughlin and the Mahavishnu Orchestra, Jeff Beck, and Tommy Bolin. Narada once told me in a Zoom session that it is always vital for him to serve the creator in his life. He is very humbled by his gift. I heard him explain once that he opens his heart chakra by singing while he writes hit songs. His heart is open to God and ready to receive love transmissions from above. Openness to the creator is evident when he plays the drums as well. Some may not be religious, but it is hard to deny that Narada has a spiritual connection to a higher power that is front and center in his production, songwriting, and drumming.

– Aubrey Dayle

## The Years Between Michael and Mahavishnu

We generally admire people who are notably high achievers. We also ask ourselves the pertinent question: How did that person achieve so much and at such a high level? The following biographical text about Narada Michael Walden will offer some answers to that question and hopefully inspire you on your life's quest for fulfillment.

On April 23rd, 1952, in Kalamazoo, Michigan, a very young couple, Harold and Peggy Walden, gave birth to their first child, a boy they called Michael. He was the first of six children. The other siblings are Ron (carpenter), Kevin (Narada's manager for ten years), Chris (truck driver, also plays drums), Yolanda (flight attendant, Alaska Airlines), and Edie (pediatrician). His father worked at a Sutherlands paper mill, as a janitor, and as a draftsman at Consumers Power company in Kalamazoo. Peggy Walden cleaned houses, worked as a cashier at Sears and Roebuck, and at various other jobs. They were the head of a typical hard-working American family. Little did they know that

Michael would later become a historically great drummer and one of the world's most significant music producers and songwriters.



*Narada Michael, Peggy and Harold Walden.*

Michael was born in a great town for music. It is a smaller city, but it is on the route between Chicago and Detroit, and fantastic musicians would do gigs there on their way to either of the two larger markets. Although Michael was born with an

enormous talent, his voyage to prominence on the music scene is full of twists and turns and is inspiring above all else.

Harold Walden was only 18 when Michael was born. He was very strict with his son, but it is an aspect of his father's that Narada Michael Walden now appreciates. It taught Michael all about discipline and gave him a good work ethic.

Harold was a music lover and wanted to be a drummer but never made it his vocation. He would put on jazz records such as *Rich Versus Roach*. Michael's Aunts Valerie and Vicky played him Nina Simone's *Live at Town Hall*, Horace Silver's *6 Pieces of Silver* (Louis Hayes on drums), and Cannonball Adderley's *7 Miles High*; Michael would play along by sitting on a chair using a pillow on an opposite chair acting as a drum, and a pie tin on the side acting as a cymbal. His Aunt Mary and Grandma Nelly brought rock 'n' roll into the house with music from artists like Little Richard, Fats Domino, and Ray Charles.

Narada received a "Toyland" drum set from Santa Claus one Christmas when he was approximately five years old; he remembers his intense joy playing that toy kit for his parents, Grandma Nelly, and

her husband. It put him in a high state. However, the drumheads were made of paper, and they broke about ten minutes into his performance. That performance sparked Michael's love of drumming early in his life, and he still gets that feeling to this day when he plays. He also stared at the records spinning on the record player turntable; this would hypnotize him in a similar way, to meditation. All of this convinced Michael, between nursery school and first grade, that music was to be an integral part of his life.

The Waldens moved away from Kalamazoo to Plainwell, Michigan. Once there, from third through eighth grade Michael attended a Catholic school called St. Margaret's, where the students had to participate in mass the first thing every morning. He would bring his drum catalog and pray to God for drums during those services. Michael also was exposed to the various hymns sung during mass, which he loved.

Around age ten, Harold's friend Marvin Smith introduced Michael to Jimmy Smith's "The Sermon" in his basement. The song made it clear to Michael that Art Blakey's backbeat was prominent, and that just playing a groove is the strongest element of playing the drums.

## Drum Set Education



Michael and his siblings.

Michael started taking formal lessons at the age of ten. He studied snare drum exclusively with his first teacher, Tom Carey, at Bobby Davidson's Music Shop in Kalamazoo. Their focus was on learning the basic rudiments using traditional grip (which Narada still uses). Carey also emphasized a focus on the left (weaker) hand. Around this time, Michael's grandfather bought him a \$100 (approximately \$969 today) drum set. The set included a blue bass drum, snare drum, cowbell, small cymbal, and woodblock. Santa Claus then brought him some hi-hats for Christmas. Michael began to play along with records, including albums by The Three Sounds, a jazz piano trio from Benton Harbor, Michigan, that recorded on Blue Note Records. The drummer in this band, Bill Dowdy, was a good friend of Harold's. Michael was able to play many of Bill's parts on drums, and he

# THE MAHAVISHNU ORCHESTRA

## *APOCALYPSE*





John McLaughlin recorded the *Apocalypse* album in March of 1974 with the second incarnation of the Mahavishnu Orchestra. This unit combined its efforts with the London Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Michael Tilson Thomas and produced by producer George Martin. The new members of the core of the group were:

- **John McLaughlin** – guitar, vocals, and composer
- **Ralphe Armstrong** – bass,
- **Gayle Moran** – keyboards and vocals
- **Jean-Luc Ponty** – electric violin and electric baritone violin
- **Marsha Westbrook** – viola and vocals
- **Philip Hirschi** – cello and vocals
- **Narada Michael Walden** – drums and percussion

Narada was 21 years old when he joined the Mahavishnu Orchestra, after John McLaughlin played with him on three occasions. John had asked Narada to move to Queens, where he found a space with roommates and a shared bathroom. His trusty friend and drum tech Greg DiGiovine built a small soundproof music cubicle in the apartment that was big enough for Narada's drums and a Rhodes electric piano that McLaughlin had given him. McLaughlin hired Gayle Moran, Ralphe Armstrong, and Jean-Luc Ponty, and the new Mahavishnu Orchestra started to rehearse.

McLaughlin and Narada became close friends. He brought Narada to Buffalo, New York to meet with Michael Tilson Thomas. They worked on an arrangement for a piece called "Hymn to Him" (which appears on *Apocalypse*) in Thomas' living room. The new incarnation of the Mahavishnu Orchestra debuted the music live with the Buffalo Philharmonic, conducted by Thomas. The performance was very successful, and Narada was so elated by the show that he didn't want to leave the stage. After that performance, John told Narada they would learn more music and travel to London, England to record an album with the London Symphony Orchestra.

Narada got the new music on demo tapes and studied intensely in his drum room in Queens. He made sure that he understood the intricacies of the arrangements and how his playing could fit in them. The band then got together at S.I.R Studios in Manhattan and rehearsed for about two weeks before traveling to London to cut the tracks. It was a live performance recording, but there was a unique process for tracking the drums. They initially tried to set up the drums in the same space as the rest of the orchestra, but the volume was too great to avoid having the drum sound leak into the mics for the rest of the instruments. The solution was to put Narada in a kind of drum booth, which was really just a room across the hall from the main studio space at Air Studios. The room had a plexiglass window through which Narada could see John and the rest of the main band. They also provided a television video feed so that Narada and Michael Tilson Thomas could see each other on the screen and interact as though they were in the same room.

The session was life-changing for Narada: He was the young, new drummer in a new incarnation of a very successful group. It was also his first recorded performance that would be released internationally. The band recorded a song without drums called "Power of Love" first, then it was time to capture "Vision is a Naked Sword." Narada prayed to God and opened his heart up to the heavens, and then he and Greg DiGiovine started the long cymbal and gong roll crescendo at the beginning into that first powerful drum fill. He desired to emulate the intense sound that Billy Cobham created in the band, but his own way, and as they say, the rest is history.

# “Vision is a Naked Sword”

This composition is mainly written in 11/8 time, although there are developmental and improvisatory sections in 11/16 and 4/4. Narada had developed a great deal of skill in odd time signatures in various playing situations, including the New McGuire Sisters, Jatra, and others. However, his one-on-one work with John McLaughlin helped him strengthen this type of playing even further. He initially learned to count while adapting his playing to the odd time signature, and then once it felt strong, he learned to “feel the shape” of the time signature. In other words, he learned to feel when beat 1 would occur, rather than counting all the beats. Narada was so comfortable with this concept that you could hear his control when he would start and end fills from any point in a bar to any point in the following bar. For example, you can hear him start a fill on beat 6 in 11/8 and end it on beat 3 of the next bar. This concept creates a solid resolution on a moment other than the first beat of the bar. Musicians refer to this concept as going over the bar line.

There is a keyboard solo that occurs after a short drum break (solo). The bass line infers that the music is still in 11/8; however, the guitar plays

twice as fast in 11/16. The orchestra then starts to play a line in 11/16 as well, while Narada embellishes the section on the cymbals and eventually joins the bass when it re-enters in 11/8. As a result, Narada keeps both 11/8 and 11/16 in mind simultaneously.

The piece breaks down to a drum and guitar duet, and a violin solo with the rest of the rhythm section. This section is in 4/4, and Narada plays a fast snare drum ghost note-oriented funk feel. He drew inspiration from the great funk players he met while on the road in black clubs, as well as Mitch Mitchell, Cold Blood’s Sandy McKee, and Jack DeJohnette on Freddie Hubbard’s album *First Light*. Narada developed this style of playing from the many hours of jam sessions, rehearsals, and road gigs rather than in an academic environment.

Narada’s playing on the *Apocalypse* album was extraordinary. He was able to step onto the musical world stage at the highest level at a young age. His touring and recording with the Mahavishnu Orchestra gave him several other world-class opportunities in the mid-1970s.



Narada Michael Walden in the studio recording the *Apocalypse* album.  
(Photo by Ralphe Armstrong)

# Vision is a Naked Sword

♩ = 80

John McLaughlin

OD

pp

2

OD

*fff* *mp* *mf* *mp* *mf* *mp* *mf* *mp*

6

*mp* *f* *mf* *ff* R R

10

*f* L L

12

3 7

14

3 3

Vision is a Naked Sword – pg 2

17

19

21

*ff*

23

24

LRL

27

L RL

29

31

33

34

36

38

40

42

44

46

48

Drum solo

Measures 50-57 of the drum solo. The notation is on a single staff with a double bar line at the beginning. It features a variety of rhythmic patterns including eighth notes, sixteenth notes, and triplets. Measure 50 starts with a double bar line and a half note. Measure 51 has a half note and a quarter note. Measure 52 has a quarter note, a half note, and a quarter note. Measure 53 has a quarter note, a half note, and a quarter note. Measure 54 has a quarter note, a half note, and a quarter note. Measure 55 has a quarter note, a half note, and a quarter note. Measure 56 has a quarter note, a half note, and a quarter note. Measure 57 has a quarter note, a half note, and a quarter note. The piece ends with a 3/4 time signature.

*mf*

Guitar Re-enters

Measures 58-59 of the guitar re-enters. Measure 58 is marked with a 3/4 time signature and contains a half note and a quarter note. Measure 59 is marked with a 3/4 time signature and contains a half note and a quarter note. The piece ends with a 3/4 time signature.

R L

*p*

Measures 60-61 of the guitar notation. Measure 60 has a 3/4 time signature and contains a half note and a quarter note. Measure 61 has a 3/4 time signature and contains a half note and a quarter note. The piece ends with a 3/4 time signature.

*mp*

Measures 62-65 of the guitar notation. Measure 62 has a 3/4 time signature and contains a half note and a quarter note. Measure 63 has a 3/4 time signature and contains a half note and a quarter note. Measure 64 has a 3/4 time signature and contains a half note and a quarter note. Measure 65 has a 3/4 time signature and contains a half note and a quarter note. The piece ends with a 3/4 time signature.