



# CONFLUENCE

**TWIN BROTHERS  
ALEX AND NELS CLINE  
BOTH BREAK EXPERIMENTAL  
MUSICAL GROUND WITH  
THEIR RESPECTIVE PROJECTS**

By Josef Woodard // Photos by Anne Fishbein

**M**usical brothers have long figured into the lineage of jazz, including the famous Jones brothers out of Detroit (Thad, Elvin and Hank), the Heaths out of Philadelphia (Jimmy, Albert and Percy) and the Marsalis clan from New Orleans (Wynton, Branford, Delfeayo and Jason).

Meanwhile, out West and lesser-known in the fraternity of musical brothers work the Clines, guitarist Nels and drummer Alex.



# of DIVERGENCE

Whereas brothers from other settings have heeded the theory of a musical household and the passing-down of wisdom from an older to younger siblings, the Los Angeles-born and based Clines are in synch as twins.

"You have solidarity, a best friend who's obsessed with all the same stuff as you," said Nels about the relationship he has with his twin. "We probably have some psychic connection."

Starting in the '80s, the Clines (born on Jan.

4, 1956) have figured strongly in the jazz and adventurous music scenes in L.A. and beyond. Both have played with Julius Hemphill, Oliver Lake and Charlie Haden, as well as numerous West Coast players to the left of straightahead. Their influential Oregon-like acoustic group Quartet Music lasted for much of the '80s.

In recent years, the Cline name has bumped up in recognition after Nels joined the rock group Wilco. But his newfound fans have a lot

to learn about Nels' twisty musical story, involving work with his trio, the Nels Cline Singers, and other liaisons in jazz, rock and experimental circles.

This year, the brothers simultaneously released solo projects on Cryptogramophone, the 10-year-old L.A.-based indie label run by violinist Jeff Gauthier. Similarities and differences mark Alex' *Continuation* and Nels' *Coward*. The former is an expansive chamber

jazz project, featuring pianist Myra Melford, cellist Peggy Lee, Gauthier, bassist Scott Walton and Alex on his large and texturally varied drum and percussion set-up. *Coward*, conversely, is Nels' first all-solo project, although it features a layered collection of acoustic and electric, abstract and lyrical sounds. It includes such seemingly incongruous—but to Cline, logically linked—references as Ralph Towner, Derek Bailey and Thurston Moore of Sonic Youth.

On a mid-January afternoon, the Clines convened in the Culver City home where Alex lives with his wife and young daughter. The interview took place a few hours after Barack Obama's inauguration, which partly explained the excitable atmosphere, not to mention having their albums timed for a joint release.

While the brothers grew up together musically, they have cleaved personal directions and lifestyles. For instance, at the interview both Clines wore black T-shirts, with telling distinctions. Nels' sported a facsimile of the album cover of the first release by the Bad Brains, the Washington, D.C., punk band, but retooled with the words "Barack Obama." Alex, the more poised and introspective of the twins, wore a shirt with the Zen-like inscription "this is it."

A week earlier, the brothers played a rare duo gig in San Diego. On the set list were Keith Jarrett's "Angles Without Edges," a snippet of Pink Floyd's "Interstellar Overdrive," the Jimi Hendrix instrumental "Beginnings," Ornette Coleman's "Law Years" and John Coltrane's "India." The set list speaks volumes about the eclecticism embedded in the Cline family crest, and manifested in their ongoing musical output.

**When you play in a duo, is it a fluid process of falling into an existing, mutual musical understanding, or is there culture shock?**

**Alex:** The only culture shock for me is that lately, I haven't been rocking out that much. So to keep up with the intensity and volume is challenging. Being mostly a parent besides a working stiff over the past few years, I never have time to practice. That doesn't usually pose many problems, except when I'm confronted with that sort of challenge. As Nels would say, "You need more than a chop for that." Most of the music I've been playing lately isn't so in that direction. Other than the tunes we decided on, there's nothing to talk about. We just start playing.

**Nels:** When we did that duo gig at the Jazz Standard in New York, which was virtually unpremeditated, there were a lot of hilarious unison moments and moments where we stopped at exactly the same time and then continued playing.

**You have both come up with impressive new albums. Certainly, Nels, this was a departure, going the solo, layered approach. Have you ever done something like that before?**

**Nels:** No, but the funny thing is that I've been talking about doing this for almost 30 years.

"Prayer Wheel" is from the '80s. I slightly revised it.

**In both of these projects, the acoustic and chamber-esque qualities hearken back to Quartet Music in a way.**

**Alex:** My record is the first one I've done with no electric instruments. That wasn't a concept, but it was something I realized after I decided what I wanted to do. A lot of the music that I'd done before this had a lot of electronically processed sounds on it, from people like [guitarist] G.E. Stinson, not to mention the occasional use of the synthesizer or Jeff augmenting his electric violin with effects and things. None of that is present on this album.

**There is a careful balance maintained between the written note and free space in the music. Was that one of your original concepts behind the project?**

**Alex:** That's an important component in the musical experience, a balance between composition and improvisation. This CD, like the ones that preceded it, tends to generate a lot of questions from listeners who can't tell when the composing ends and the improvising begins, and vice versa. That's a gratifying blurring confusion, because it signals that I'm doing something that is to my liking.

It does say a lot about the musicians that this can happen, because if you don't have that kind of understanding among the people playing the music, it isn't going to work. Remarkably, these musicians had never played together in this particular combination. Most of them had never even played my music before. It was a risk.

When we got into the studio, the musicians who were not already familiar with playing my music, particularly Myra and Peggy, were taking the music where they wanted it to go. They had their way with it and made things happen. That was mind-blowing, because that was exactly what I'd hope would happen.

**Nels, your album also has a nice blend of free zones and themes, written-out parts. I assume that was part of the game plan.**

**Nels:** After thinking about this record for 20-something years, I went into the sessions with virtually no material. I had out-thought myself. I'd thought about it for so long and rejected and came up with ideas, everything had changed. Life had changed.

But I just decided that, psychologically and spiritually, this record had to get done. There was a window of opportunity, after a lot of high-stress times. I wanted to address what [painter] Robert Motherwell used to call the "innermost necessity." I went in there and flailed around. My friend Mark [Wheaton] was at the controls, and he let me go in there and spaz out. It couldn't have been without computers. I would get ideas and then want to move entire sections to other parts of a piece, which is so easy with Pro Tools.



There were times when he thought I had no idea where I was going, but it all came out in the wash. The piece for Rod Poole ("Rod Poole's Gradual Ascent To Heaven") was never even intended to exist. It just created itself.

**One of the distinctions of your lives as Los Angelenos, in contrast to East Coast-based jazz musicians, is your proximity to show biz machinery.**

**Nels:** Which is weird, and I think Alex would agree, but I feel immune, for the most part. It didn't ever have much impact on our household growing up. Our parents did not shun films. Our dad had been informed by going to films every Saturday afternoon as a boy. As a way to get him out of the house, his mom would give him a nickel and he'd go watch movies all day on Saturday. This was likely where he formed the idea of life outside of San Pedro, life off the docks, out of the Navy, all the things that were his milieu.

**How did things develop musically, in your formative years?**

**Nels:** I was fixated on rock 'n' roll from 1965 onward. The moment at which our friend Pat Pile, in elementary school, took us over to his house after school and showed us his snare drum, and played us the drum exercises he was working on. He was talented. Hearing him play a snare drum in his bedroom, I felt my face was going to crack in half. I could not stop smiling.

**Alex:** This was the time when AM radio was starting to experiment with playing album tracks.

**Nels:** Obviously, there were The Beatles and Rolling Stones, and I was super into The Byrds. I liked Love. Then there was Jimi Hendrix, who was an epiphany. One Saturday afternoon, I was in the back room at our folks' house listening to KHJ. They played "Manic Depression," which was odd, because it wasn't the single. We were jumping up and down, yelling and freaking out. It was like being zapped for three-and-a-half minutes by pure electricity.

**So the path of interests led you from Hendrix through progressive rock and then into jazz? Was that roughly the trajectory?**

**Nels:** Yeah. The jazz and prog rock thing happened simultaneously, though. The jazz thing was before the prog rock thing. We had a friend who had bought a John Coltrane record for his father. Our friend had heard the record and he thought, "Alex likes that instrumental Frank Zappa stuff. He might like this." In retrospect, that seems odd, but delightful.

We had lumped this all into a general fascination of things instrumental and things uncategorizable. In 1971, Mahavishnu Orchestra's *The Inner Mounting Flame* came out, and pre-funky Weather Report was starting up, Herbie Hancock's septet—stuff we were enchanted by.

A weird desire to play a combination of King Crimson, the Allman Brothers and Weather Report—that's what we were trying to do in high school. I joke that our music hasn't changed at all since high school, except that we play better. The parameters are constant.

**Nels, you have come full circle, working in jazz and rock contexts.**

**Nels:** My fixation on Buffalo Springfield and the Byrds is paying off. And Humble Pie.

**Alex:** Captain Beefheart and the Mothers were big for me, and some heavy metal bands, because being 14 and playing the drums, you've got to like visceral, hard-hitting music. Although my favorite drummers at the time, I realized years later, were essentially approaching the music like jazz players. Mitch Mitchell was my first drum hero, Clive Bunker—the original Jethro Tull drummer—and Mike Giles, the original drummer for King Crimson. Hearing Tony Williams' Lifetime was what changed everything, the group with John McLaughlin and Larry Young.

**Was hearing McLaughlin early on an epiphany for you, Nels?**

**Nels:** No. Alex was obsessed with McLaughlin. I liked the acoustic stuff the best. *My Goal's Beyond* blew my mind. Seeing Mahavishnu Orchestra live was like having all your hair burned off in one fell swoop, but his guitar playing wasn't influential. I was trying to go in a different direction. Alex was bummed out. I was listening to Pat Martino, Joe Pass and George Benson, and trying to adapt all that to a slightly more hippie-ish feeling. There was finger vibra-

to involved. But I liked that cleaner sound, less emotive. Alex was saying, "No note-bending? No distortion? You're useless."

**Alex:** That's not exactly what I said.

**Nels:** But I remember one time, on a particularly good rant, you said, "This guy Pat Martino is a bad influence. What's up with that tone? There's no definition. It's all bass." Finally, John Scofield came along and he had the best of both worlds. You can hear the horn influence and an incredible harmonic knowledge and bluesiness.

Not to go too far with that, this period that we're talking about was a period of complete exploration, when things were not defined. Radio wasn't formatted yet. Ronald Reagan hadn't come along and ruined everything. Why are the '70s maligned? We've all long since accepted disco, and punk rock is supposedly the greatest thing since sliced bread. So what was wrong with the '70s? What was also going on was the AACM, the ascendance of Anthony Braxton, and concurrently Air and Leo Smith.

At the same time, there was the so-called electric jazz before it was called fusion. There were incredible groove records coming out, whether they're overt, like Tower of Power and hit singles, or groove records like Ramsey Lewis records or Lonnie Liston Smith. Pharoah Sanders was still putting out great stuff, infused with African and Indian influences. Nobody is saying, "You can't do that. Put on your suits. This is not dignified." But it was absolutely intuitive. It was time to explore. That's when we were trying to figure out music and what to do.

**Alex:** This is also the time that ECM records became a huge presence in our lives.

**Is that partly what led to the formation of Quartet Music?**

**Nels:** It led to the duets with me and [late bassist] Eric Von Essen, which led to Quartet Music. When we first met him, Eric was playing guitar and table and piano. We went and heard him practicing in the practice room at UCLA, playing Chick Corea's "Song Of The Wind," and couldn't believe a student could play those wild chords.

**Alex:** Quartet Music signaled a newly prominent period for Nels as a performer. For me, it was another aspect to what I was doing. It became a constant working group, even though we mostly played here, because there was no practical way to do much else. It was also unfortunate that we made so few recordings, considering the amazing wealth of material we had in our repertoire.

The milestone in the middle of all this was Julius Hemphill's JAH Band, in 1984 through '86. I had played with Julius prior to that time, in 1977 and '78, in a trio with Baikida Carroll.

Julius had this idea to put this electric band together. He wanted to know if Nels would be interested in playing, and if I knew any good



bass players who I thought would be good. I said, "Get Stuart Liebzig." He had Juma Santos playing percussion. We started playing together as the JAH band—Julius Arthur Hemphill. For our second tour, in 1985, we did what Julius had always imagined and wanted to do, which was add a second guitarist, Bill Frisell.

Unfortunately, that band was never adequately documented. In the mid-'80s, this was considered a controversial move, having a band with a bass guitar and two electric guitars, playing a lot of not only rock and blues-based music, but, in true Julius fashion, leaving it open to the talents of the musicians to take their music anywhere.

**Nels, I was thinking that you have dual citizenship, in rock and jazz.**

**Nels:** That's what I used to call my weird double life. People were interested in my jazz experiences. But most of my jazz guys I play with, I don't even tell them about my so-called rock experiences. They don't even know about it. It's like I have some private secret life.

**Something interesting is happening with your Wilco connection. You, drummer Glenn Kotche and keyboardist Pat Sansone are infusing the group with these experimental touches, which were always bubbling beneath the surfaces but are now more integrated into the sound.**

**Nels:** I don't think there's anything conscious about that. I don't ever think that I'm adding anything new to the band, but people keep telling me I am. I know that live, things have ramped up, with Pat and me joining. The band

became a little different. It is the longest that Wilco has had solid personnel, and I can probably speak for my bandmates in saying that we're having a blast, playing gigs that we're proud of. The music is still fun to play and we're playing to the best of our ability. Everybody seems to be doing the music for the right reason, and we have so much freedom. It's not like playing in a normal rock band.

Jeff [Tweedy] just writes songs and we play them. It's tapping into my latent Buffalo Springfield and Byrds interest. It's odd for me only because it's odd for other people, that I go out and play the same songs. I'm not immune to rock pageantry. There are things I like about it. I had never got in front of an audience that was that obsessed with a band. On the first gig I did with Wilco, the crowd hollered so loud when we took the stage, it scared the hell out of me.

I'm encouraged to do as much of my extracurricular stuff as possible, with the attitude that everything you do is bringing something to this group. The management started working with me, because they like what I do and they're into jazz. Ben Levin, who works at management, also manages Dave Douglas.

**Both of you, maybe because of your experimental proclivities, grew up with the do-it-yourself and self-reliance genes. Did that come naturally?**

**Nels:** That's what everyone was doing in the '70s. Before punk rock, there was Kabell—Leo Smith's label. Julius had Mbari. Oliver had his Passin' Thru label. Jerome Cooper had a label. New Music Distribution Service collected it all and distributed it. It wasn't like, "Oh, I must suck. That's why I have to do my own little release." It was a point of pride. Punk rock came along and did the same thing.

**Alex:** The other side of it, at the most fundamental level, is that if you want to play and you want to do your music the way you want to do it, and no one is going to book you at their venue, then you figure out a place to do it. It's that simple. You rent a church or you play in an art gallery. That's what we always did, even right out of high school. We weren't going to get gigs at a rock club or a jazz club.

This self-determination idea is, for example, how [L.A.-based reedman Vinny Golia's] Nine Winds started. Similarly, this is how Cryptogramophone started. Everything is a response to something else. We've benefitted from the amount of success that Jeff [Gauthier] has had, because of all this labor-intensive, non-musically inclined endeavors that have taken him even out of his own musical pursuits, to a point that also is something of a concern for him.

**There is the theory that having a somewhat crazed and committed force at the helm is what makes artistic enterprises work.**

**Nels:** I'm more lucky. I play guitar. People like guitar. I'm so glad I don't play trombone.

**Alex:** When I've made these CDs, I've always made them with the sense that this could be the last time I get to do this. I may not get this opportunity again, to record this music in this way, at this level, with these musicians, and not have somebody dictate how they want it to turn out. I have to maximize what I've got and turn out something that's not only something I would want to listen to, but something that expresses what I want to express.

**Could you and Alex see doing something together on a more regular basis, in terms of**

**gigs or recording?**

**Nels:** It's unlikely. Recording would be fun. That would have to be planned ahead of time. I travel constantly, which doesn't mean we can't gig or make recordings. But I don't think about dragging Alex out of the house too often.

I'm not thinking of doing a bunch of solo gigs to promote my record. That's something else our records have in common, apparently, along with the titles and the fact that they were recorded in the same week. I just made my record with the idea that I would enjoy it and the people who know me would like it. **DB**



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