



INFIELD

The enduring frisson of Michael Graff

Story by Kevin Ryan -- Photos by Logan Cyrus

Keeping his eyes on the road, Michael breaks the silence, “Look, I’m gonna show you who I am. And you write whatever you want. Don’t hold back. This is my life, this is who I am.” I nod, he nods. There are long stretches when neither of us is talking, when we just sit there like two old men watching baseball on TV. No chatter, no nerves, as he guides his truck along. We stare out at Charlotte, North Carolina, at the late afternoon, Friday, 17 March 2017, St. Patrick’s Day, the world ornamented green. The radio is on: NPR, pledge drive, begging for your money. Michael jokes that Trump’s budget cuts to Public Broadcasting will fuel donations. We turn into a shopping center, then web along for a spot. The parking lot is restless. “Here we are,” he walks toward a giant bouncy castle.

Kids sprint and leap all around the patio, some of them are shoeless.

Merciless savages fighting for reign of the inflatable stronghold. There are outdoor beer taps, Guinness and Smithwicks. We meet Michael’s friends. “We had lunch at Price’s Chicken Coop,” he says, with a cross-wise grin and a basso chuckle, his hazel beard floured lightly at the sides. Then he gets distracted, scouring through the crowd with oceanic eyes. He does this back and forth, staring off only to return to the conversation with information about the people around us, says a few things then recedes into observation—like he’s divided. They ask him where Laura is. She’s on her way. The patio is crowded, shoulder-to-shoulder, and now it’s the adults acting like savages. When he sees Laura, I recognize the look on Michael’s face, as if the crowd opens away from her into waves. Michael Graff is in love.

Michael and I ride back to his

and Laura’s place. He detours into some lavish neighborhood. Brief hills succumb to Colonial houses. Each street is lined with willow oaks, all planted in unison a century ago. The trees are getting old, Michael tells me. They’re banded at the waists like giraffes wearing diapers. And it’s only a matter of time before they collapse, in unison, all the same way, all the same age. But the way he says it—it doesn’t have to be sad. And a constant breeze whorls in through the open windows, loud and quick and everywhere at once.

He parks in front of their soft-yellow brick house. I tuck my suitcase into a corner of their guest bedroom, then we walk to a pizza place for dinner. Over Jalapeño IPA’s, Michael talks about writing. When he’s interviewing someone for a profile, he likes to ride around with them, to get them in their car: “I want them to show me

stuff. Invariably they show me what they want to show me, and you can pick up a lot about a person by what he shows you." The restaurant is crowded, half-can-

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MICHAEL GRAFF

dlelit. "Every town has most of the same stuff—every town has a Walmart, every town has a hardware store, every town has a bar, but which of those things are you choosing to show me? Because that tells me what you do, where you go, and what you care about, so I want to know about that." He talks low and certain, each phrase collected. His sentences strung with natural poise. "If I'm going to write about a symphony I'd rather watch a symphony practice than perform in front of an audience. I want to see what everybody's like when the show's not on. I try to get people in those situations. 'What are you like in the backroom?'"

In their living room, the record player looks like a shrine, and, in a way, it is. Next to it, a vase with yellow-tipped meadow flowers, a candle. Above it hang two concert posters, both held by string to a wooden plank at the top and the bottom. The one on the left shows a man in jeans and a red flannel shirt and burgundy shoes walking through a forest of turquoise and red, blue and grey and dark. He's lugging a guitar case, an axe propped on his shoulder. You get the impression he's strolling through a place where dark things linger, but he keeps walking, expressionless, good-postured. Each tree branch holds the shadow of birds.



SHOVELS & ROPE
 JANUARY 16, 2016 • Charleston Music Hall,
 in Charleston, South Carolina

The concert, Laura tells me, was their first date. She laughs as she reminisces. "A concert three hours away, overnight—it wasn't your average first date."

Michael smiles. "She told me that she had a friend in Charleston, and she might stay there. It was a hell of a conundrum for a guy trying to make a good impression but also not wanting to rent a \$400 room alone."

He reserved a room with two beds. The room was dingy, but that didn't matter. After the concert, they went back to the room together. They talked for hours, then slept in separate beds.

Then Van Morrison's *Moondance* comes on. We talk
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about language, about stories, about beauty, about love, about falling, about life. Laura, soft brown eyes, chestnut hair, natural smile, sits on the floor, facing Michael in the loveseat. She describes Michael's writing process. "When he's working on a story, it's so intense. On weekends if he's writing, a lot of times he'll work all day." There's a warmth to her voice. "He has this focus, I've learned to just let him write."

Everybody I spoke with described this state. "He has an incredible eye for detail," said Michael's younger brother Kenny. "He notices things most people don't. He's a good listener—he's always been like that."

The staff of *Charlotte Magazine*, where Michael serves as Editor, agree. "It's intimidating," says Kristen Wile, Senior Editor. "the way he thinks so carefully about everything he says and writes, and everything that comes out of his mouth is just pure brilliance." Arts Editor & Digital Editor Andy Smith: "It's more than just being observant, but being curious. And being genuinely interested. You can't write stories like those without being a good listener, being someone who understands narrative." Associate Editor Adam Rhew considers Michael the best editor he's worked with, and a good personal friend.



He has that quality. From the start, he's treated me like an equal, like a friend. As Van Morrison wails about the mystic, Michael asks about my Maryland travels. What did I think about Kenny? I felt at ease around Kenny right away. No recorder, no notepad, just seafood and a couple beers. It was a blistering-cold day. Patches of snow on the ground and the wind was violent. The restaurant was full of D.C. elite. We were both out of place—it was lovely. When I told Kenny I'd never had crab cakes before, he said "Don't waste it here. Get them at Stoney's. They're as big as softballs." The next day, I did just that. Caricatures of birds run along the walls of Stoney's Kingfisher on Solomon's Island, Maryland, a village-sized oval of land surrounded by Chesapeake Bay and farmland. At night, looking up from the woods or the water or the docks, the sky is sobering. You witness the actual size of stars and say, "God."

I spent three-and-a-half days visiting many of the places that Michael has lived and written about. He grew up in Indian Head, a secluded town on the Potomac River which sits



at Mile 1 of Maryland Route 210, a quiet 45 minutes from Washington D.C by car. The town hall is attached to Panda Café. A pale blue water tower overlooks the town. Large birds wander above. The backroads are walled in by massive trees that rise 50 feet, maybe higher. Occasionally, fields appear. Behind a slim red-doored church, a sign says Maryland Airport, with decaying single-engine planes in the field, all looking toward a sign that reads “Learn to Fly Here.”

In an email, Michael mentioned that the house where he lived till he was 15 was on an unnamed dirt road in Chicamuxen, with no exact address. I trekked through those backwoods. And something drew me to one house in particular. I took a picture. When Michael sees the picture, he stops—lost in a gaze at the screen. That’s the house.

These days, it’s yellow, unsold, empty, perfectly attuned to the stillness of forest, a flattened T, with a circular driveway and a carport and a meadow of its own. Michael’s dad cleared the land around with a Bush Hog. As a boy, Michael would wander around the woods, grab frogs in the creek. “The creek,” he says, “was an eternal playground for two boys.” He pauses. “Those are the things you don’t talk about—like the creek, you don’t talk about that when you’re an adult.” Some nights, he’ll dream about the creek. He’ll look around, and he’s down by the water.

Michael and Kenny used to rollerblade off the back deck to see who could remain flying the longest. They played baseball nonstop. One of them would pitch, the other would bat. If you sent the ball flying into the woods, it was a homerun. But if you hit a groundball into the woods, it was a live ball. You ran the bases while the fielder chased the ball, and you ran until the fielder threw the ball and yelled “Infield!” then you had to stop right where you were and go back to the previous base, but you were safe.

When Michael was 8, his dad built the 24’x24’ room at the back of the house. “Seeing this house reminds me of that time,” he huffs, amazed, giving a pulse to each word: “He. Could do. Everything.”

One morning before school, Michael walked into the shed and found him hanging upside down from the beam as he installed electricity. He looked at Michael, “I’m doing this so you don’t have to.”



It’s Saturday night, the day after St. Patrick’s Day, so the streets are empty. The three of us meet Kristen, Senior Editor at *Charlotte Magazine*, and her husband Jon. We talk journalism over wine and beers, surrounded by TV’s, each with a different view of March Madness. After an hour, we walk to the bar next door, it’s raucous, swarming. As the bartender sees Michael and Laura, he stops what he’s doing then weaves down the bar. I get a few moments alone with Kristen and Jon. Yes, they tell me, this is really who Michael is. “If you read his writing first,” Kristen says, “and you speak to him in person, the level of thought is exactly the same,” a senti-

ment echoed by everyone I met. “He’s so quiet, so you never know what he’s thinking. And then as soon as he talks, it’s like, ‘Of course you were thinking that brilliant thought.’”

I mention that Michael told me he doesn’t enjoy the physical act of writing as much as the reporting. Kristen shakes her head, grinning. “He’s such a perceptive person that I could see him enjoying the information gathering. But I don’t believe that he doesn’t like writing, he’s too good. Everything he writes is just too good.” She laughs, “Even his e-mails are like beautiful prose.” Kristen looks at Jon, speaking softer. “Michael’s one flaw is that he doesn’t think enough about himself. He’s so willing to mentor and edit and sacrifice for the magazine that he needs to be a little more selfish sometimes. He’s just such a wonderful person that I wish he would think more about himself.” After a pause, “And I wish he and Laura would get a rescue dog.”

We wind up at Reid’s Fine Foods in time to watch Nashville’s A Boy Named Banjo perform. Michael and Laura dance, they sing along with the crowd—“Take a load off, Fanny / take a load for free / Take a load off, Fanny / and you put the load right on me.” A few songs later, our Uber arrives, a shiny black Mercedes Benz C-Class, trunk loaded with subwoofers.

Back at home, Michael puts on Springsteen’s *Born to Run* and sings along with “Thunder Road.” Laura never had a record player growing up. Only a cd player, a hulking thing that had to hook into a boombox for speakers. “Tenth Avenue Freeze Out” roars through the speakers. Theirs is a house of music.

After a while, Laura goes to bed, and Michael talks about his dad. His eyes swell. “When you’re born, you can’t walk. Then you learn to walk, and you can live a life, then you fall back down again. You’re always, constantly afraid of that fall—that last fall.”

Michael’s father, Fred Graff, had, unbeknownst to his family, been a prolific and adept skydiver. After Fred suffered his first stroke something opened up. He told Michael about his days as a skydiving bachelor. Michael wrote about it in the piece “Up and Away.” The story is special to him, like an old friend. Thinking about it, he grins, “If I get Alzheimer’s or have a stroke one day, that’ll be the one story I remember.”

It’s been 8 or 9 years since Fred had his first stroke. A few weeks ago, he fell. He hit his head. He’s been on the mend. “Here’s a guy that used to jump out of planes. And land. No problem. He could do everything. And the irony of the story is, here you are again, totally afraid to fall. That is his biggest fear in life: falling.” Sometimes, gripped to his walker, Fred will holler Michael’s name, he’ll start yelling, afraid he’s about to collapse. “Falling is his biggest fear and he used to do it three times a day sometimes.” He laughs at the weird absurdity of it all. “And that’s such a part of every story—it’s all of our stories. The idea of falling is the ultimate fear. We all spend our lives just trying not to fall. And then you have these people who jump out of planes on purpose. Maybe that’s the human desire to accomplish everything, even the fall.”

THE POWER OF WORDS

When he talks about skydiving, something undulates from Michael's eyes. He's transported, he's midair. Hurling down through an unmissed sky. A drift of wirework azure. A boundlessness you fall through, eyes closed, you fall through—then open your eyes, with the world spread below you, engulfed by the silent hurtle. The quiet is absolute. You don't plummet, you freefall. You spread across pacific white, until you land into the lives below.



For the first part of Sunday morning, Michael, in his grey Appalachian State long-sleeve, reads *The New York Times* while Laura reads *The Charlotte Observer*, then they trade. The Brian Fallon record is still on the record player from last night.

I slouch into a chair on the front porch, adrift in thought. I spent time with Michael Graff and he showed me his life. And his life, his story, is filled with optimism and people and words. He's guided by music, by love, by family. And he disproves the cliché of a talented writer as self-destructive fallen angel. You don't have to be miserable or unpleasant to be successful. How Michael treats people, how he sees the world: This is how a person should live.

After a while, Michael peeks out the front door. "Laura," with a smile, "there's an Irishman on our porch." He walks out to the truck, carrying an empty ice chest, loads it into the truck-bed next to his bluefade Nishiky Manitoba and an old chair he's been trying to get rid of for weeks. Behind him, the red vibrance of a sprawling tree with blood-orange leaves. All the other trees are green or bare. He latches the tailgate. "I'll fill that cooler up with seafood, mostly crabs and oysters. The crabs are coming in earlier than ever before." He shakes his head as he starts the truck. It's quiet. He turns the truck toward downtown. "I don't understand how people can defend the idea that it doesn't exist, that the world isn't getting warmer: The crabs are literally coming in earlier than ever before."

I say something about the birds who eat plastic from the ocean because they think it's food, but stop in time to spare us the depressing conclusion. Near the center of the city, the crossroads at Tyron and Trade, music gets louder. A man hacks at a pearl Stratocaster till jazz-funk bleeds into the street.

Every time Michael has driven me around Charlotte, a calm seriousness overtakes the air, but this time is the most serious yet. It feels oddly med-

itative, urgent. Only I'm distracted. I keep thinking about last night. I close my eyes, and we're all there again: We're in one of those cars, the kind with a trunk so full of subwoofers that it sinks in the back and the windows rattle and people stare and you can't hear a thing because the bass is so powerful. The road unfurls into the black Mercedes Benz C-Class. "Used to This" surrounds us, rattling the windows—the roof throbs and the air shakes like something you could touch. An aftermath of rain sheens the asphalt, vanishing under the car as it blurs along Sharon Rd., past CEOs' palatial houses and NASCAR heroes' mansions. Without warning, the car slows for a speed bump, and the driver groans, "These things, always slowing me down," then hurls the car back into flight.

Who knows how fast we're going. The dashboard flashes 10:01 p.m. Windows open, the perfume of mown young grass wavers damp air. Charlotte out the window, trees banded at the waists. This is the kind of moment you close your eyes into for keepsake. Each carrelbound star blesses down on Charlotte. In the backseat, Laura is smiling, she's laughing at something Michael just said. They lean into each other like two familiar birds.

