

## ***TOMBSTONE (MINE)***

By Michael Ventura

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A while back John called and asked that I contribute to “our tombstone.” I said, “What?” He said something about “we’re putting out our tombstone,” and he wanted me to contribute to the notes. Again, “What?”

This John is John Densmore of The Doors. We met in the Eighties at a Robert Bly men’s conference, and we’d come to know each well, performing together, and taking yearly drives into Baja until we were shot at one midnight in Ensenada – or that’s the story we sometimes tell. Truthfully, though guns were drawn and pointed and there was much confusion, I can’t honestly say that anyone fired. Anyway, to return to the phone call, gradually Densmore made it clear that a “tombstone” is what a band calls its CD box set.

This is by way of announcing the “official” debut of my own tombstone: [www.michaelventura.org](http://www.michaelventura.org) – actually, [www.michaelventura.org](http://www.michaelventura.org) has been up (is Cyberspace “up”?) about two years, but now there’s enough stuff on it to make it, in musician’s usage, a tombstone.

It was, at first, a project I viewed with squeamish reluctance. Born not quite mid-way through the last century – 1945, the year the Allies liberated Auschwitz, Truman bombed Hiroshima, and Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie made their first bebop jazz recordings – I was one of the last writers I know to give up the typewriter.) My caring colleagues at *The Austin Chronicle* finally pushed me into the Electronic Age with the gift of a MacBook 10 years ago. Now, sitting here in my L-shaped work-space of adjacent wood TV trays, there are two HPs and a Mac, all laptops, sometimes running all at once. I’m writing on Cover My Back (this HP’s name), while something’s displayed for reference purposes on the Cadillac (a wide-screen HP), and the Tardis (the Mac) is doing something else (of its own volition, or so it seems). It’s cozy and busy and gives me the feeling that I’m working very hard indeed, firmly contemporary in spite of my advanced age. An illusion. We are children of the era that shapes us, and the world in that shaped me into a writer is the world of 1945-1960, when my task became, in a way, simple, or at least direct: Just get it on paper, whatever “it” happens to be.

There is one exceptional advantage to the writer’s life, expressed best by Big Boy Medlin when we collaborated on a screenplay. We were trying to work but all I could talk about was my troubled relationship with a magnificent and troubling woman, until Big couldn’t take it anymore, and he held out his thumb. “See this thumb?” I saw it. “If you don’t stop talking about that woman I’ll ram this thumb into my right eye.” Then Big said, “Hey, what you’re going through now, you can use it in your work. Aluminum siding salesmen, they can’t do that.”

In a similar or adjacent fashion, friends prodded me to create [www.michaelventura.org](http://www.michaelventura.org) – but it took a while. Eight years ago, Duke called from New Jersey. His name’s not Duke, nobody else calls him that, but I like to. Duke is a man of ideas, and when he focuses on an idea he’s a man of irresistible enthusiasm. His idea that night was I should put my stuff on a website. I recoiled. He knew I would – we’ve been friends since we were 18. Why I recoiled it’s hard to say. The page is my reality. The page is where I do what I do. Even after all this time, a screen doesn’t feel quite like a page. I learned to type at age 12 on a manual Smith-Corona, and in my early 20s I was a typesetter. I have a typesetter’s touch, too hard for computers, I’ve broken more than one by wearing out the keyboard. I type hard enough so that, for instance, on this HP the lettering’s been beaten off eight keys. “Have my stuff hanging up in Cyberspace – Duke, I dunno.” For me, writing for the page is like recording jazz – I write it, it gets on the page, then goes wherever the page goes and it’s out of my hands. I enjoy that. A website felt both too permanent and too present. Still, Duke’s idea stuck with me.

I think of the column as a jazz gig. Every two weeks I take my axe, I go to this little joint, I play all night, then have a few drinks, and it’s over. What happens to the result afterwards is none of my business. [Editor’s Note: More than 300 of Ventura’s biweekly Chronicle columns since

1996 are available at [austinchronicle.com](http://austinchronicle.com).] What with all the research that's sometimes necessary, it's more complicated than that -- but that's the feel of the act of writing. So it took some time to warm to the idea of lots of this stuff hanging around me in a space called [michaelventura.org](http://michaelventura.org).

The trouble with us 20<sup>th</sup> Century types is that when you use the word "space" we visualize, well... some kind of space. "Cyberspace" evokes for me a space perhaps in outer space, or in the ether, nowhere and everywhere, a void in which all the articles on [michaelventura.org](http://michaelventura.org) hover, hang, nailed to a virtual wall like paintings in a museum. Once I dreamed that all the paintings in Manhattan's Metropolitan Museum of Art floated off their fastenings and floated on out the doors, down 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue, illuminated by streetlamps and by the headlights of astonished cabbies... the paintings floated down past Washington Square, past the Bowery, down to the docks, until finally they became sails -- Brueghel sails, Monet sails -- fitted to a many-masted clipper like the ships in that poem of Hart Crane's, and out to sea they voyaged, away from undeserving and deserving eyes alike. The shrink, she said, "What in holy fuck am I supposed to do with a dream like that?!" "It's not a dream it's a *vision*!" And the shrink and I argue on (in memory), while you and I get back to the subject of this paragraph, which is: the hovering movement of that dream, that's how I see Cyberspace and that's what I see my writings doing in Cyberspace. Brueghels and Monets make far more gorgeous hoverers and are immeasurably more important than anything I do, but that's the image I gradually warmed too.

There's nothing I take more seriously than my writing, but it's the *writing* I take seriously -- as a "body of work" I don't think about it much. A kind of defense mechanism: If I took my "body of work" too seriously I'm afraid I'd freeze up. (Let's face it, I'm pretentious enough as it is.) To build a website meant looking at my body of work and it was a long time before I could face that. Friends kept nudging me. Jazmin said I owed my body of work something more -- a notion that, to put it mildly, I resisted. Then about three years ago Spider Johnson showed up, we got to talking about a website, and, as is Spider's way, he sat right down and within a few minutes there existed a thing called [www.michaelventura.org](http://www.michaelventura.org). Oh my God. (No kidding, that was my reaction.) Later I was introduced, on line, to Web designer Art Freeman (check out his masterpiece design, [www.daiiv.aWonderfulTribute.com](http://www.daiiv.aWonderfulTribute.com)). For me Art designed an elegant, easy to use, writer's library. I don't know if Art was aware of it, but his design made me face my work as a whole.

Later still, Anne Walsh showed up. We've not met -- she lives back East -- but somehow Anne found what little there was of [www.michaelventura.org](http://www.michaelventura.org) and she *really* made me face my work, though that may not have been her intention. Most of the 200-plus articles and excerpts that now hover in the site's ether wouldn't be there but for Anne's generous efforts. As I'd proof-read something she'd typed, written 10 or 20 or more years ago, I'd see myself change. The elaborate and often elegant sentence structures of my late 30s became jagged (in a way that I like) by my mid-40s; I became less concerned with sonority and more with punch (there's more to punch these days); I deal less with abstractions (though I like abstractions) and more with details (which is, as Dave says, where God and the Devil hide); and in between the lines I see that over the years I take myself less seriously as a writer and more seriously as a man.

So thus it is that this tombstone exists, and I'll continue to add to it, because it fascinates me. It's like reading someone else. Sometimes I go, "Who the fuck does this guy think he is?" Sometimes I laugh, "How many goddamn epiphanies can one schmuck have!" And sometimes I go, "Hey, that's pretty goddamn smart, not bad, fella." And sometimes I cheer this guy on-- "Pretty good jab, man, hit 'em again." So, ok, writers are *mucho* self-involved. But it's like this Ventura writer is a different self, as in the Juan Ramon Jiminez poem that begins, "I am not I."

Some thought I should charge a fee for the site or run commercials on it -- but I just can't. As Brando says to Ben Johnson in *One-Eyed Jacks*, "That's not my style, Bob." One kindly soul suggested I stick "Visit [www.michaelventura.org](http://www.michaelventura.org)" at the end of each column. I kind of gagged. So it's just there, floating in the ether. And I'll add to it regularly, as I study the work of this

writer who happens to be me, and who, on the site, is younger and older and in-between at the same time... aren't we all?

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