

search

Issues

ADVANCED SEARCH **GO**

**contents**

[NEWS](#)

[DINING](#)

[CULTURE](#)

[MUSIC](#)

[FILM](#)

[CALENDAR](#)

[BEST OF](#)

[CLASSIFIED](#)

[ROMANCE](#)

[WILDSIDE](#)

[PROMOTIONS](#)

[WEB EXTRA](#)

[ESUBSCRIBE](#)

[ABOUT](#)

**AUTOBUZZ**  
Weekly Reviews, Notes,  
Rants and Raves

**ONLINE CLASSIFIEDS**  
WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING FOR TODAY?

Jobs  
Business Services  
Guitars

**Avant Guardian**

Composer Michael Serviolo rides the loopy bandwidth of his own Elan-gated invention.

BY JOHN LA BRIOLA

Seated in Domo -- a local, rustic Japanese eatery that doesn't believe in forks -- Michael Serviolo studies his menu like a finicky working-class gourmand. He exalts the merits of green-lipped mussels over the lesser species of poultry, considers aloud how the distinct tang of lemongrass might accent the fire from imported red chile, then selects a hearty stew of marine critters, vegetables and soba. When a huge bowl arrives, he seems content to sit and gaze at its steaming contents -- a symphony of colors, textures and smells all blend together in remarkable harmony -- before finally nodding in approval. He grips his chopsticks like a culinary vet from Okinawa and digs in slowly, ecstatically, as if gauging his own capacity for sensory overload.

"This rules," he concludes.

A sonic conceptualist by trade, Serviolo has a knack for mixing fresh ingredients into something exotic. His music is not so easy to sum up, even in headbanger's terms. A longtime staple on Denver's music scene -- Serviolo first appeared with Local Threat, Peace Corp and Acid Ranch as well as the original Jux County, alongside founder Andy Monley -- the 36-year-old guitarist can climb scales with the virtuosity of a Juilliard-trained jazzbo or summon the ragged glory of punk. He's likewise able to cover everything from metal-flavored progabilly to the swinging lounge grooves of the Perry Weissman 3, an adventurous local act that has soldiered on without him since the spring of 2000. (Eric Allen of the Apples in Stereo recently filled his vacancy.) After quitting the Weissmans "to pursue other interests," Serviolo turned his energies toward two longstanding personal endeavors: the angular and hard-rocking IZ and an introspective electronic recording project called Elan.

*The Deluge of Soundtracks & Other Voices From the World's Silent Majority*, Elan's fifth full-length release, finds Serviolo and longtime collaborator Chris Steele (the two met in East High's jazz band before Serviolo dropped out in his junior year) using a surprisingly guitarless approach to creating strange and playfully ambient worlds. By sequencing sounds from outside sources and sending them through distortion pedals and other effects in a process called "squarewaving," they coax multi-layered tones from unlikely origins. "Afterbirth Pt. 2," for example, features an airy choir that sounds like a thousand pennywhistles morphed into the clatter of train tracks.

"They're all internal sounds from a keyboard," Serviolo says before resorting to gear lingo.

<http://www.westword.com/issues/2002-02-21/music.html/1/index.html>



John Johnston

The wizard of IZ: Guitarist, composer and teacher Michael Serviolo.

**this week in Music**

**Music**  
**Spanish Inquisition**  
Outspoken and a little bit angry, Desaparecidos uses artful indie pop to question everything.

**Playlist**  
**Mates of State**  
*Our Constant Concern* (Polyvinyl)

**Don Walser**  
*Rolling Stone From Texas and Texas Top Hand* (Texas Music Group)

**Carl Cox**  
*Carl Cox Global* (FFRR/Strictly Rhythm)

**Negativland**  
*Over the Edge Vol. 4: Dick Vaughn's Moribund Music of the '70s* (Seeland)

**Critic's Choice**  
**Critic's Choice**  
Breeders

**Hit Pick**  
**Hit Pick**  
Rachel's Playpen

**valentine's day**  
**is around**  
**THE CORNER**

WIDESPREAD WEDNESDAYS  
  
GIGGLING GRIZZLY

westword.com  
**WE'VE**  
**ADDED**  
**A NEW**  
**FEATURE**  
"Bringing Local Music to the World!"  
CORNERBAND.COM

"We're using a Korg O1W, which is a sampler with built-in sounds. And we're using a PMA5, which is about this big," he continues, holding his fingers nearly half a foot apart. "We combine everything -- strings, piano, noises -- but by the time you mix it together, you don't know what you're hearing, it's so *tweaked*. Some of it reminds me of world music."

The album's 21 tracks certainly cover a lot of ground, everything from Taiwanese elevator music ("Lizard Special") to the trance-inducing drones of an African thumb piano ("Polymeric Trickster"). And while it celebrates recreational savagery over artiness -- thus avoiding tedious layovers at Brian Eno International Airport -- *Deluge* rewards a close listen with its pulse, movement, interlocking rhythms and textural detail. It's also something of a loosely structured concept album.

"It's like the silent majority putting together something in the artistic sense," Serviolo says of the album's rather ungainly title, a twisted allusion to a phrase Richard Nixon once used to describe the Republicans of the late '60s. "A lot of music like this never sees the light of day. When you're in the United States, you're so isolated. We absorb a lot of cultures, and there are a lot of different kinds of people living here, but everybody always just becomes an American when they're here. It doesn't matter where they're from. And that's not bad or good; it's just a fact."

Given that Serviolo's own bloodline is a mixture of Sicilian, Jewish, Native American and Uzbekistani strains, among others, it's little wonder that Elan's music borders on the eclectic. What's surprising, though, is how he intends to market it.

"I could easily see this stuff in TV commercials," he says. "Those are the most artistic things that the United States have going. They sell lifestyle, but they have ideas -- whereas you watch TV shows and it's about nothing." Does that mean that Serviolo worries that the fruits of his labor might wind up being used to peddle cheese doodles or a douching product? "I really wouldn't care, because to me that's not a form of selling out. The music is still the same. But it's a rough business. Advertising firms usually call sound libraries. Mechanical licensing and all that stuff -- that's a part of the business that's hard to understand. But I work in it, so I have to think about it."

For the past seven years, Serviolo has moonlighted in the retail division of Indiego Promotions, a locally operated music-marketing business. It's a part-time gig that brings him face to face with the brutal truths of the music industry.

"At the most, there's like ten major labels in the United States, right? And each of those put out, what, ten artists a year or something? That's a *hundred* bands. And how many bands are there in the U.S.? A hundred thousand? Forget it. Don't quit your day job. If you get into these weird contracts with labels, they can have exclusive rights to your material. They can have exclusive rights to the use of the name. And you're making pennies on royalties. *En Vogue* sold millions of records, and they end up making like thirty or forty thousand apiece? C'mon! That's a travesty! But that's the reality. The only reason to create music, then, is to make the music that you want to make and do things on a small level."

With his own label, Infinite 7, Serviolo is free to do his own thing. He's issued a slew of albums and compilations too numerous to list in their entirety; they include a noise-rock experimental seven-inch called *Lance Corona's Feeding Time*, released under Serviolo's death-metal alter ego, Lance Corona; Elan's self-titled debut in 1988; and its odd followup, *Vlad Hatter's Tea Party*, in 1991.

"For the most, part Infinite 7 is just projects that I'm involved with," Serviolo says. "In truth, it's a vanity label, like most labels. Even labels that put out other bands are vanity labels, in a sense.

"[And] seven is the holy number," he adds. "I associate it with really good things. There's seven seas, seven great mysteries, seven days in the week -- it goes on and on."

With sound-mucker Gordon Klock and drummer John Haley rounding out the original Elan foursome, the band created dense and often frightening soundscapes, spoke non sequiturs and silly poetry on "Sympathy for the Meatloot" and forged such wonderfully twisted instrumentals as "Mudsocket" and "Folkdance for Insects." With the addition of bassist John Martinez, Elan made the most of its rare live performances.

"We did some wild shit," Serviolo says. "We served hors d'oeuvres with toothpaste on crackers. John [Haley] would play himself in chess while we did this insane improv. Gordon made a demon's head that would spin on a wheel. There was a lot of video feedback -- when you point the camera back at the monitor and it makes weird, loopy psychedelic feedback." (Serviolo has a turquoise-colored "7" tattooed on his right deltoid as a souvenir left over from one of the band's live outings: "We all got 'em at the same time after a show in San Francisco," he says. "Fifteen bucks apiece back then.")

By the mid-'90s, most members of the band had gone their separate ways, but Serviolo and Steele's enduring do-it-yourself approach has carried the outfit into another decade of recording, allowing *Deluge* (available only through [mp3.com/elantheband](http://mp3.com/elantheband)) to reach a potential audience without the cost of physical pressings.

With the recent resurrection of another project, IZ, Serviolo is planning a return to the stage soon, flashpots intact. Once an aggressively prog-oriented combo that concentrated on straight-ahead rockin', IZ dissolved when guitarist Dan Zelnikoff, bassist Adrian Romero and ex-Abdomen drummer Scott Young all left the state seven years ago. (There's that number again.) As the only remaining member of the band's inaugural lineup, Serviolo is eager to front a new, scaled-down trio with Jux drummer Ron Smith and ex-Moot bassist Bob Gumbrecht.

"It's probably easier for kids to relate to IZ because it's loud, it's rock, and there are guys playing instruments," Serviolo says. "People want that kind of identification still, even though there's a lot of electronic music in it, too. We're leaning toward the loud, obnoxious metal side; I always have to give the disclaimer."

Without going into what the definition of IZ is, Serviolo maintains that the new material he's written should pick up where the original band left off with its self-titled debut, released in 1994. That album's tight, precise off-kilter appeal lay in frantic instrumentals ("Bumpercars," "Running Man"), plus more accessible vocal-driven punk/pop ("I Am Here," "There Is No Reason") that always showcased Serviolo's fluid, elliptical guitar lines. Not blessed with the best pipes on the planet, Serviolo still avoids love balladry like a leper colony, opting for wordplay, hidden meanings and double entendres in his tunes.

"I like writing lyrics, and I can sing in pitch, but the way my voice is, I can't deliver it," he says. "But I can't think of anyone else that could. That's the problem. I think most singers suck. Especially locally. I can't go for all of this tongue-swallowing type of singing. Who gives a shit? What I'd rather hear with the metal bands is no vocals at all. Metal is such a strong genre. Why can't it just stand on its own without some asshole saying something that you can't even understand anyway? In the case of KISS, their lyrics are retarded. Admittedly. Anyone who's heard them knows that. But for the overall vibe they're creating, it's perfect. They make it work because they're good singers. And it's sort of a fascist thing; it's supposed to appeal to as many people as it possibly can."

Without benefit of Kabuki makeup or a king-sized tongue, Serviolo aspires to more modest goals: "A buzz within the indie scene and some touring would be ideal," he says. "Just as long as I don't have to put out the CDs every time."

Serviolo plans to record the next IZ full-length in March with longtime associate and local producer Mike Jourgensen. In addition to engineering the Perry Weissman 3's self-titled debut, Jourgensen also released two Elan efforts, *Von Weber* and *Eris of Aurora*, on his D.U. Records label. Additionally, Serviolo has amassed at least an album's worth of classical guitar studies with six-stringer Mark Stookesbury -- tracks that remain in unpackaged limbo for the time being. Asked if the unreleased tracks from his final days in the Perry Weissman will ever see the light of day, Serviolo shrugs. "That's sort of out of my control," he says. "I have no say in it. But there's some material that we recorded almost two years ago that I think is really good. I wrote about half of it. And I'm interested in working it out."

A prolific cuss, Serviolo spends nearly every waking hour at music's beck and call, whether he's composing it, performing it, promoting it or even teaching it. Once a student of Jeff Froyd's (formerly of the Young Weasels and the Del Fuegos), Serviolo implements theories designed by the Berklee School of Music to teach roughly fifteen young students in the metro area.

"I don't really like to go below a twelve-year-old," he says. "I'm willing to teach them Green Day and Blink-182 and all that stuff, just because they're into it. I want them to like the instrument. Then they can expand from there and start getting more technical. The other thing about my teaching is that I go to people's houses. I charge more. But I do that."

"Teaching is the thing that I like to do more than anything else," he adds. "I'm dealing with kids, and they're excited to learn how to play guitar. They learn how to play a song that they like by whatever band they're into. It makes me feel really good."

Serviolo is less enthusiastic when it comes to the sloppy lifestyles that rock musicians maintain in general, and without prompting or naming names, he suddenly launches into a scathing sermon in the name of sobriety. "People underestimate how hard a skill music is," he says. "It's a trade. It bothers me that musicians are looked at no better than janitors. The problem is that they *act* no better than janitors on occasion, too. You know, they're out there, drunk. I'm so fuckin' tired of people who do drugs. Musicians, especially. I've had a lot of friends who were junkies. They insist on living that lifestyle. It's almost like it's *mandatory*, like it's in the rule book. Like you can't be creative -- which is bullshit. You're either creative or

you're not.


"By the time I was 25, I quit doing everything," he continues. "I drink, like, once a year. I'm actually pretty militant about it. Rock and roll is really bad for your health. It's hard enough just playing loud music and lifting gear. Then you throw in alcohol and fucking chicks with herpes. If you do the full lifestyle, it just ends up *ruining* you. I always respected the straight-edge movement when I was into hardcore, because I thought it had potential even though it was preachy. If kids were into politics and sober, they could really change the world."


Until that happens, Serviolo can concentrate on his own clearheaded creations -- and try to avoid the countless charlatans that infest the music business. "Every time I do something, I have to ask myself if I want to do it," he says. "Sometimes the debate gets pretty heated. Once I get past the cynical point, I see the things that I can do. If I choose to, I can put out a record. And if I want to, I can play shows and promote them. Now, is the white limo gonna pull up with a bucket full of money?


"Probably not," he says. "And even if it does, maybe I should run the other way."

[westword.com](#) | originally published: February 21, 2002

-----

 [Printer](#) friendly version of this story

 [Email](#) this story to a friend

 [More](#) stories by John La Briola

 [Email](#) this author

 Send a [letter](#) to the editor

[News](#) [Dining](#) [Culture](#) [Music](#) [Film](#) [Calendar](#) [Best Of](#) [Web Extra](#) [Archive](#)

[WESTWORD.COM](#) [CLASSIFIED](#) [ROMANCE](#) [WILDSIDE](#) [PROMOTIONS](#) [ESUBSCRIBE](#) [ABOUT](#)

[Contact Us](#) | ©2002 [New Times](#) All rights reserved. | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Bug Report](#)