

Lao Tizer
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Interviewed by: Susan Johnson

Writing and playing piano since he was five years old, Lao Tizer just finished his much-anticipated fifth CD and he is only in his mid-20s. His first three were solo records and the most recent one, **Golden Soul**, was produced by Chieli Minucci and was the beginning of Lao's work with a band. He has come a long way since then and now Chieli is a guest on Lao's upcoming CD, **Diversify**, which hits the streets in April.

SmoothViews (SV): *It has been five years since you released Golden Soul and four since you were nominated for Best New Artist at the 2002 Smooth Jazz Awards. Tell us a little about the path you've taken towards recording your new CD.*

Lao Tizer (LT): Well, I got over my bout with heroin... (jokingly laughs) Okay. I'll take this seriously... (laughs) The path since then has been many, many hours of hard work; a lot of fun times on the road developing more and more of a following across the country; and playing a lot of different shows in a lot of cool different places alongside some of my musical heroes. That's been pretty exciting. And really focusing on writing songs for the new record that are going to come from a place... a little bit different place than **Golden Soul** did. I really focused on crafting some memorable melodies for certain commercial tunes and then the rest of the record is just kind of making a new statement about where my artistic vision is, at least at the current time, and helping that evolve to a new place. So it's been quite a journey in the last five years... from parting ways with my former manager and being more hands-on to hopefully growing musically a great deal. After all, that's the whole objective.

I think my strongest attribute as an artist has always been the ability to connect with people in the live setting more than any place else. When we play live, the connection we make with the fans is something that can be very special. That means a lot to me... that I've been able to, whether in a solo setting or with my full band, be able to reach people and kind of open their minds and hearts to what I/we are doing. When people ask me to describe my style of music, I always try to give them the least descriptive title I can. I think the more open-minded they are going into it, the better served they'll be to just listen and experience the music for what it is instead of trying to title it and identify it and have some pre-conceived expectations. So the magic that happens live is definitely something that is unique and special.

SV: *How will this new CD differ from your previous four?*

LT: The name of the album is **Diversify** and I think that says a lot about it right there. It's definitely the most diverse of anything that I've done and I think it's got everything from some very intimate moments of solo piano to

real high-energy band stuff and hip commercial stuff. It's also been an opportunity to take the next step by incorporating some other production techniques and other instrumentation that I haven't used in the past, including some vocals. There aren't any lyrics, per se, but some vocal colors on a couple of tunes. And I've incorporated some of the more modern production techniques (drum programming mixed with live drums, etc) than what was on *Golden Soul*. I just think that the record is going to make a big, broad statement and give people a lot to chew on. I think the most important thing... I know for me, with my favorite records and favorite artists... is that I have to listen to a record five times before I really can say that I understand it. And usually the records I like the best are the ones that it takes five times to start to grow on me and every time I listen to it, I like it more. And, I think... not in any way to compare myself to some of the great artists (laughs) that I admire... but I think this is going to have that quality to it. I want listeners to give it multiple listens and discover what's in there. It's got a lot of different moods and a lot of different styles, but it's cohesive at the same time and I think that's a very important thing with musicians... to be able to show a lot of different influences, but have your own style with which you go about everything. I think I've discovered that with this CD and that makes me feel good.

My regular band [Jeff Kollman, Christopher Maloney, Drew Megna, and Steve Nieves] joined me on the record, along with numerous other guests. One thing that I believe in strongly is the commitment that my band has made and the bond, musically and personally, that we've all developed over time in touring together and the time we've spent together... I wanted to keep that cohesiveness as much as possible. Yet, at the same time, you have to do what's right for every song. So, they all play a very large role in the record, but there's some very cool guests on there as well who brought their distinct talents. That's always a very exciting thing... to work with new people or to have someone you're not accustomed to working with come in and bring their own colors to your songs. That can be a very magical experience.

SV: How did you decide who will be a guest musician on which song?

LT: That's a tough one. I guess you just kind of decide by thinking... if you have a person... it depends if you're using someone on only a couple of tunes or if it's someone like the percussionist we brought in, D. Munyungo Jackson [who has recorded and performed with, among others, The Supremes, Temptations, Four Tops, Aretha Franklin, The Pointer Sisters, Kenny Loggins, Sting, Miles Davis, Stevie Wonder, Lionel Richie, and Jonathan Butler] who is on half of the record. So with a guy like that, you're not so much choosing the songs he's going to be on as much as what his specialties are and applying those to the songs because you kind of have a pre-conceived notion. Whereas, Chiel Minucci, who we had the honor and pleasure of having on this CD as well, I try to pick songs that will utilize his strengths and also utilize his name. So, he's on one of the tunes which certainly is a good candidate as a single. We also recorded him on a tune that is completely different, more like an acoustic trio that is very intimate and fits

his acoustic guitar style very well. Also, Karen Briggs [has played with Yanni, Chaka Khan, Stanley Clarke and Dave Grusin], who is one of my favorite musicians that I've ever worked with... she plays violin, so it's obviously going to be specific to what songs violin is appropriate for. It's only appropriate on a couple of songs. So it just kind of depends on the person and what you feel their strengths are as a musician and what their instrument brings to the table on a particular song. Then let the magic happen!

SV: Unlike a lot of musicians who have experienced success playing at festivals and night clubs, you have continued to play the streets also as a solo performer whenever you are home in the LA area. I think this gives people who are not familiar with contemporary jazz a rare opportunity to experience the music. What does this experience give you that performing with your band might not?

LT: Well, since that's how I started out when I was 14 years old... I got my start performing in different outdoor venues in major tourist locations and there's something magical that happens in that setting because it can be so intimate when there isn't anything logistical that divides you from the audience. Also, playing solo I've always improvised a lot and that allows me to go further down that road. So that's really cool, because a lot of my song ideas will just come there when I'm improvising. So it's just the ability to be creative. When you're with the band, you can improvise and be creative but not to the same extent because there's a certain amount of structure that's necessary... so you all sound like you're in a band... as opposed to warming up! (laughs) It's something that will always be a big part of me whether I continue to do it long into the future or not, it will definitely always have a special place in my heart. It took me a long time to make the transition from that kind of setting to the stage setting, which I've done so now I feel just as comfortable on the stage as I do playing solo. It's just a completely different experience when you have moments of magic and inspiration by yourself as opposed to playing with the rest of the band.

SV: How does self-managing compliment your musical career?

LT: (laughs) Work, work, work, work, work, work. It allows you to... I think the biggest benefit is to speak on your own behalf. And if that's something that means a lot to you, then I think it's very valuable. Also, to be able to control your artistic statement a little more than if you're with a label. I don't want to make a record that's all structured. I want to make a record that has stuff that is commercially viable, but also makes a larger statement in other areas as well. But self-managing does allow me to craft my creative vision better and I like developing those personal relationships. There are, of course, a lot of challenges that come with it. I think what's going to make me successful or this group successful and really go to the next level is being something fresh and different and that's all part of this. When we go to radio with the first single, I want it to be something that is going to be in the pocket, but at the same time, something that is fresh and different. I want to make a fresh, youthful, exciting statement.

SV: What are the challenges of writing, producing and distributing your own CD?

LT: I don't know if I would describe writing as a challenge. To write great songs takes time. Not everything you write is great. You have to give yourself time and get perspective on things to understand whether it's a song that really can stand the test of time. I really think that, due to many factors, this is one of the first times I can say that every song on this record has been very well thought-out, conceived and arranged. There has been an immense amount of detail that's gone into it. And it's the same with any business that you run. I have a great sense of responsibility to the investors who backed me and, of course, I want it to be successful for them, for myself, for the band, for my fans! More than anything, I really hope and believe that this record will be something that my current fans and new fans can really grab onto and feel like they've been a part of making it possible... because they have been! Without them, I'm just some guy playing piano.

Jeff Kollman is the producer and I'm the co-producer. It's been a major joint effort and the amount of work involved is hard to put into words. It's lots of hours, lots of energy and lots of love that's gone into it. A lot of focus and the creative efforts of so many, not just Jeff and I, it's an experience that's hard to quantify. You pour everything you have into it and it really takes over your life. At least, that's been the case with this record. Every record can be a different experience. And the reward that I'll experience down the road is something I can't even fathom right now. This record is something that we can all be very proud of. In the end, that's what's great about it.

SV: Has your strategy for distribution changed since you released Golden Soul?

LT: I want to utilize the newest technology. There's something to be said for the kind of ingrained standard technology, but there's so many new outlets as well. So a combination of all that. Certainly satellite and internet, digital downloads, those kinds of things are invaluable. But I still believe your true fans and those who latch on to the project or you as an artist will want to hold the real CD in their hands and be able to look at the artwork and read about it, so it's a combination of everything.

Going back to the production of the record, I guess I've kind of seen this now more than ever. I've never been much of an opponent or said much about people downloading music for free, but I will say this... I think that any music fan with a conscience, if they could be a fly on the wall in the studio for even a few days when someone is making their record, seeing the amount of work and detail and effort that goes into it. I don't think they'd ever want to download anything for free again in good conscience. When I think about another artist and the work they put into their record equals or quite possible outdoes mine, and the sale price for that is between \$10 and \$20? You get a lifetime of enjoyment out of that record... I can't think of nearly anything that's a better investment. People spend five bucks on a cup of coffee at

Starbucks and might scoff at a CD for fifteen bucks. That's something that will last you forever. And if it's great, that's a lifetime of enjoyment. And not to mention that if you're a true fan of music, I hope people recognize that it really does hurt artists. This is how we make our living and every CD sold makes a difference to me. It may not make a difference to Britney Spears, but I really encourage people... and this is in no way judgmental at all, it just has occurred to me that, man, in my humble opinion the record industry kind of made a mistake in the way they approached the piracy issue. Instead of making the argument to people, look what you get for only \$10-20... they took 12 year old kids to court and sued them for internet piracy, not a brilliant PR move in my opinion, but in the end, it's probably for the best because the restructuring of the industry has been such that more and more of the money is going to end of with the artist when the music gets sold and that's where it belongs. I mean, everyone deserves their piece, certainly. There are a lot of people who make the business work. We're lucky enough to do this because of the fans, but at the same time without the fans support we can't do it. It's an important two-way street. Thanks to all of the music fans who recognize that and understand. You pour everything you have into this... or at least I have! I'm so close to it that it kind of owns my days. It's like a child. Or about as close as I need to get to a child right now! (laughs) The single keyboardist...

SV: As a young musician in the industry, what changes in the music industry have enhanced the genre and what are its biggest challenges?

LT: I think the biggest challenge for the genre as a whole is reaching new fans. I think that... what I always find and this is why I love playing live and shows that are outside of the typical jazz world is that you have the opportunity to reach young audiences. I've been emailing the last couple of weeks with a fan from Chicago, who is really a big fan of the jam band scene, which is something that I've never quite understood. But it reaches out to so many college kids and such young audiences with great, quality musicianship. So I emailed him and basically said that I know we can reach these fans musically, but I'm curious as to how we tap into the scene. He had seen me in San Francisco playing solo when he was with five of his friends who had traveled to a show out here and he's like, "Man, they haven't stopped talking about it since." So I think reaching new audiences and winning them over to the music is the biggest challenge for anyone in this format. That's what any music needs to be able to continue forward. If you lose your young fans, it's the cycle of life... people don't go to as many shows as their responsibilities in life grow... jobs, careers, families, etc. But what I love is being able to reach all ages. That's the best. I love the 10-year-old kids who will get so into the music right alongside their grandparents who make that same connection. That's special.

SV: What advice would you give a young musician who is trying to break into the business?

LT: Get into car sales. I hear there's a lot of money in that. (laughs) It's funny, because the beautiful thing that has happened with the music industry being completely changed by the whole advent of the internet and piracy and digital technology, etc... I think we're dawning on a time where there's going to be much fewer major household name artists and a lot more mid-level artists. Which is great because there are so many talented people out there who never got their voices heard for whatever reason, because it takes a certain amount of business savvy and an opportunity of right place, right time and a lot of tenaciousness. So I would just say dream big. Go for your dreams. Write great songs. In the end, no matter how great you play as a musician, I think it's about writing melodies that tell people stories. Music is about a feeling and conveying that to your audience. But yeah, dream big. I think I have and I admire all those who do. It's out there and you can make it happen. That's the beauty of the music business today.

SV: *How about those Denver Broncos?*

LT: Super Bowl XXXX, baby! Here they come! They look pretty good and I think they have the best shot of any team left... not by much, but they have the best shot. I know Vegas says they have best odds. I think they should win, but I could easily see them not winning because Pittsburg is hot. We'll see what happens! If they play up to their potential, they're a better team and they're at home so they should win. [Sorry Lao!]

SV: *Any last words for your fans?*

LT: Thanks for giving us all the opportunity to do what we do and please keep supporting the music, live and records. And spread the word. That is, in the end, the most valuable plug for any artist... a recommendation from a fan to another fan. And thanks to my fans, in particular, for their patience (laughs) in making the new record! Please go out and buy 200 each, so I can get a steak burrito! Much love....

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