

**Neighbor Profiles** – a series of interview-based stories about members of the PPUABA  
**By Patti Veconi**

**Michael-David Gordon, Park Place resident**  
November, 2022



Michael-David Gordon is a neighbor, actor, musician, teacher, a fellow Scorpio – oh this was going to be a delightful conversation! He was born and raised in Bed Stuy and has been circling the park almost ever since, spending long periods in Kensington and Park Slope before landing in Prospect Heights about eighteen years ago. *“What brought me here was love – my girlfriend lived here.”* Over time, that relationship morphed into a friendship and although they continued to share the apartment for some time, she has since moved away and he now has different roommates. *“I love it here. I love Prospect Heights – the neighborhood is great: the park, the museum, the gardens, and just the streets. My favorite bodega is on the corner – where they still give credit – and there’s a great mixture of new and old businesses. I’m not like a lot of my colleagues who think gentrification is always a terrible thing. It may not be a popular thing to say, but I think it’s complicated – and yes, there are elements of racism and classism involved – but it’s complicated. My relationship with Prospect Heights, however, is not complicated: I love it.”*

I had never met Michael-David before our meeting, so I did my homework and visited his website: <https://www.everythingmichaeldavid.com/>. I strongly encourage all of you to do so – and you can buy his new album, “22 Dollars” while you’re there. The songs are all beautifully distinctive but with a through-line of self-awareness, self-love and personal journey that makes listening to them as

they are presented and curated on the album a reminder of what it used to feel like to sit down and listen to an entire side of an album and appreciate what an artist is saying through their work. My favorite is “Without Me” because the message in the lyrics is so poignant and relatable but the music pushes the listener to use those words motivationally – to get up and get on with it.

Even just looking at his website you can tell that Michael-David is a balanced artist with his creative work applied and expressed equally between music and theatre. *“That’s very true – that’s on purpose – music and theatre are balanced because I make them so.”* His theatre work reaches back to a many decades career, the last thirty of which he has spent as a salaried member of the Irondale Ensemble Project in Brooklyn. They are a company that goes back and forth between original works that speak to political and current events and producing established works. *“Brecht is sort of our unofficial company playwright. We also do a lot of Shakespeare. We did a project called ‘1599’ in which we performed all in one night the four plays Shakespeare wrote in that year...pretty intense.”* Regardless of the work happening at Irondale, Michael-David always keeps that balance with music in his life. *“I would never leave music aside and concentrate only on theatre.”* But since he started singing as a child in middle school chorus and then went to Music and Art High School (now LaGuardia) as a voice major, I was curious as to when and how his interest in theatre began. The question’s answer took us in a direction that surprised me. *“When I went to college in New Mexico I chose musical theatre for my major – though I really can’t remember why that was what I chose – but I was there on a baseball scholarship. I was a jock and what a very strange mix those two things were. They’re very different worlds and being a male jock is very different than being a male theatre artist or singer...music and theatre are much more collaborative.”* We spoke about the similarities but striking differences between sports and arts: the relationship between ensemble and team – audience and rivals on the field – collaborators and competitors – I’m sure there have been many scholarly papers written on the intersection of sports and arts, but Michael-David has lived that intersection. *“People love sports so much because it’s very clear; the Yankees either won last night or they lost...and they lost...terribly. It was brutal. But there is clarity: the Astros are going to the World Series and the Yankees are going home. You don’t have that kind of clarity when you make art...and that’s the beauty of it actually and what I love about it...the complicated aspects of making art – there’s a struggle there in the creation of art, but that struggle isn’t against anyone – other than maybe yourself or your own muse, which I don’t consider a struggle – that’s more of a dance.”* As it turned out, having professional pursuits in those two different worlds wasn’t sustainable and eventually the arts became more prevalent for Michael-David. *“After my tryout with the Mets I thought okay, I had my shot and I got to play in Shea Stadium and it was great, but I put that part of my life away. It wasn’t particularly traumatic because I loved what I was doing and I really did want to make art.”* Baseball and sports are still important to him and he still plays, *“But it’s in a different part of my life now.”*

In addition to being a musician and theatre artist, Michael-David is also a teacher and our conversation returned more than once to teaching. His philosophy or approach is simple: *“The gateway to any kind of decent teaching is giving attention. And to give someone attention is a superpower. There’s a teen theatre company that I co-direct. The Irondale Young Company and it’s all about giving them attention – it’s so basic.”* Other projects at Irondale include their Police Project: *“To Protect, Serve and Understand”* which brings seven civilians and seven police officers together over the course of a ten-week theatre project centered on the relationships between the public and law enforcement. *“Our criteria for participants is simply finding folks who have strong opinions about this subject. Why is there tension between the public and law enforcement? That’s the underlying question.”* He talked a bit about the interview and selection process, ending with, *“It’s really intense. But we start the first evening with a home cooked meal because it’s a lot harder to hate people you’re sharing a meal with...and an underpinning of the project is that it’s a lot harder to hate people you’re playing with, singing with, spending time with, making eye contact with and that you connect with. Having done this project now nine times, I understand a lot more about why cops have the persona they have on the street.”*

When I asked Michael-David to tell me about a favorite performance moment that particularly resonates and that he returns to, his unhesitating response was *“Oh, when I’m fronting the Michael-David band for sure. For sure - that’s when I’m right in the sweet spot - I just booked a gig at the Apollo for Valentine’s Day.”* Wait, what? We are 45 minutes into our visit and I’m just hearing this? *“This is the third time that I’ve done the Apollo and being on that stage – and the place is packed – and you come onto a space where you literally feel the ghosts of James Brown and Michael Jackson.”* At this moment I wished I were conducting a television interview and that you, dear audience, could see his face because it was lovely to watch Michael-David see that stage in his mind as he spoke. *“As you go onto the stage there’s a tree trunk there that traditionally you rub to connect with the spirits before you go on; and you know, rubbing that tree trunk and walking on and the place goes ‘WAAAA!’ it’s, it’s, it’s insane.”* He pauses to nod and confirm that this is, most definitely, the performance moment he loves to return to, then adds. *“The sound of your own voice going out into this vast darkness – it’s intense, it’s pretty cool, this is what it’s about...and you’re getting well paid!”* The theme of the Apollo’s Valentine’s show that evening is “Love of All Kinds” and Michael-David’s set will include a mix of pieces from his new album and earlier works, *“But definitely ‘22 Dollars’ will be in it, and probably ‘Without Me’ too.”* I want to go!

More eloquent writers might have better words so describe someone who is joyful and self-fulfilled, appreciative of the world and the people he shares his life in this world with but who is also not the least bit complacent or inattentive to where work needs to be done. *“What a pleasure and joy and blessing it is when you get up in the morning and you love where you’re going...every morning!”* Michael-David fully appreciates that he is the rare performance artist who is able

to fully support himself with his music and theatre work. In addition to being a company employee with Irondale Ensemble Project, Michael-David has had a long relationship with other companies in New York as well including Theatre for the New City. *“They gave me my first professional job and I will be back singing there next week.”* Earlier in our conversation Michael-David shared that he is bisexual and at this moment he paused to say, *“You know, I spend much more time trying to explain what it means to be a working artist than what it means to be bisexual – it’s not even close. Just two weeks ago I was on a date and that question invariably arises: ‘So, what do you do for a living?’ and this was something we had already discussed, she knew I was a musician, she knew I was an actor, she’d gone to my website, and that happens all the time. I’m not even offended by it.”* We discussed this assumption about the finances and life of an artist for a while and Michael-David summed it up with this: *“Making one’s living doing this gives your life a whole different kind of hue – in terms of how you carry yourself, what you do, where you go, how you think, who you hang with...I love hanging with artists...although they do make me crazy sometimes, I love being in their presence because we have a shared language.”*

Michael-David used the word political several times during our visit, referring to himself as political, and I was curious how politics and activism intersect with his work. *“At Irondale, we think of ourselves as Citizen Artists and recognize that the artist has to be responsible and politically connected and conscious. You have to be connected and immersed in the world to make art. You have to be open to being influenced by what’s happening so in that respect politics is a big part of my life. I feel a responsibility – and I find myself using that word a lot these days – my responsibility, our responsibility – because, you know, we’re connected.”* This sense of connection became important to Michael-David some years ago as the result of a meditation practice he began. At his first visit to the meditation center the teacher talked about connection to others in a way that no-one had ever explained or spoken about it before and it was a moment of realization for him and an example of how the circle of being a teacher and receiving from a teacher has always been something he recognizes and honors in his own life. *“You and I are teaching each other right now.”* He was right of course; I know that I certainly learned a lot from our visit.

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Thank you to our neighbor Dewi Billano for introducing me to Michael-David. If you have a neighbor that you would like to see profiled for our series, please send your suggestion to [ppuaba.webmaster@gmail.com](mailto:ppuaba.webmaster@gmail.com).