

Dana Leong - The Interview

By June Medrano
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Dana Leong the electro-jazz cellist/composer from San Francisco has played beside superstars like Barry White, Whitney Houston, Paquito D'Rivera, Kanye West and Miri Ben-Ari. He and his band "Milk and Jade" have recently toured Asia and sold out every venue and are set to tour Europe this fall. Dana's uncanny ability to cross genres and give his audience as he would call it "music for situation" has been one reason for his massive success.

We wanted to find out where it all started, so we asked for his blueprints for getting inspiration, creating music, and staying busy. Here's the first part of his three part interview.

Plateau: Who is Dana Leong?

Dana Leong: I am Dana Leong and you're in my studio. I am an artist, musician, producer, and composer. I play the cello and the trombone and I am known because I mix genres all over the place, everything from hip-hop, jazz, rock and even some things from orchestral music all into one.

Plateau: So where did it all start?

Dana Leong: I grew up in the Bay area (So I got love for the Bay), but I moved to New York almost ten years ago now, and I went to the Manhattan School of Music, which is why I ended up in this neighborhood. I started out playing with a bunch of live hip-hop acts. Luckily, I came at the tail end of an era. When the Bad Boy label was still coming strong with the whole cast and I actually had a chance to play with Lil Kim and even some of the older greats like Barry White, Whitney Houston and later on that lead me to doing work with a lot of salsa acts and pop acts and later working with Kanye West and Miri Ben-Ari and her family. So that's how I started out, just making a big move from the Bay area to try and get my feet wet in the big city.



Plateau: Did you always think you would end up in New York City?

Dana Leong: We'll as a 16 year old kid you don't really know anything you just know hear say. You talk to your friends and I spoke to some of my other musician friends and they say San Francisco is this, L.A is this, New York is this and Boston is this. Nobody knows for sure because nobody has been anywhere because your only 16. But the one thing that is for sure is that everybody universally somehow agrees that New York is 'it' and if you go there, there is no place to go after that. So some part of me was like "I have to live there once, but I'm not sure when." I had scholarship I could have stayed and went to Stanford University and ran track and field, done a little music there but I would be 5 minutes from my house. I could have went to UC Berkeley and continued like my father and studied science. He was a chemist. But at the last second, I said if I'm going to do it once, it might as well be right now. As a last minute decision I moved to New York with one little Duffle bag.

Plateau: So what did your parents say about that. Where they supportive?

Dana Leong: My mother is very supportive till this day and there been times where I thought “I’m not sure if this is for me maybe I should come home and maybe I shouldn’t do this anymore because it’s a grind no matter what level your at it’s still a grind”. Nobody is going to do the work for you. You gotta get up, you gotta promote yourself, you gotta keep making your music, and continuously find and redefine that dream. So my own mother was like, “No don’t come home because there nothing for you to do here anymore, it’s still the same. It’s beautiful but what are you going to do here? You might have to change you career and do something completely different so when you’re ready to do that you come home. So until then you better stay in and make it work”.



Plateau: What’s your background in music?

Dana Leong: My mom is a musician also; she started me off really young. I grew up in the San Francisco. In the bay area there’s a whole culture, it’s got its own feel....And everybody there [no matter your color or background] is African American...you know what I mean if you’ve been to the bay area... There’s this flavor from hip hop and R&B being the main source of music there. When I was coming up if you listened to anything other than that you were kind of different. It wasn’t until late high school or even in college when people really started to listen to other stuff, new wave rock and alternative or far out electronic music. You were basically in hip hop or r&b or you weren’t in.

In school I was learning instruments and learning classical music, but every second that I could get I was like glued to your local radio station just checking out all the new Biggie stuff, all the new Tupac, all the new Dog Pound. You know when Too \$hort was still putting out classics. Everyone was out, Mary J. Blige...it was like the hay day. And I grew up in that, when melody was strong and rhythm was strong, and metaphor was strong. That’s where I came out of...so when I came out into the city I had all that experience in me already, and knew that I wanted to mix that with the training and the classical way of learning music, but also ingrain something exciting and ‘more raw’ into it.

Plateau: So who were you inspired by then?

Dana Leong: There are certain types of people who had the right effect who inspired me. Like I said, I had the pleasure of touring with Barry White towards the end of his career and life. He had a big 40 piece orchestra and I was right in front of the cello section and we would tour around, and every where we would go there were like thousands of people out there in a big auditorium or a big amphitheater.... for the most part people in a group without inspiration they just sit there, stand and wait, but the instant that music started up, and the orchestra started jumping, and Barry White came out and the instant that they could even see him or catch a glimpse of him, they knew what was coming and it would just light up the whole place. And something like that is something that has stuck with me since the very first day I set foot on stage with him. I was like “that’s a special type of cat”. Today, the instant someone like Beyoncé steps on stage, you know there is going to be energy, you know that something raw is about to go down. It’s inspiring to me to find that direct communication, the electricity of lighting up the room.

Plateau: Do you feel like you bring that to the stage also?

Dana Leong: That’s what we’re striving to bring every time. That’s the inspiration, and that’s what we do, we aim, whether it’s a small crowd, a big crowd, a big place, small place, a rainy day....no matter what. When we come we come with the A game.

Plateau: You had the opportunity to tour Asia and sell out every venue that your band hit. How did that opportunity come about?

Dana Leong: We were part of a very special program called the Rhythm Road American Music Abroad, which is something that's put together by New York's own Jazz at Lincoln Center, under the artistic direction of Wynton Marsalis, and the U.S State Department of Cultural Affairs.

It's basically the same part of the state department that supports Fulbright Scholarships. Many major politicians in history have been supported on their philanthropic and research missions by the State Department such as Bill Clinton, Colin Powell, Kofi Annan, and Jimmy Carter. The particular program we participated in dates back to the days of Louis Armstrong and Dizzy Gillespie and includes many of the finest jazz musicians in the history of the music.



We were selected out of hundreds of bands from all over the nation. There hundreds of applicants and many bands that flew to New York from across the nation for the semi finals. The process between the audition and the completion of tour took about a year. The first step in the process was just submitting paper work. We gathered letters of recommendation, submitted a CD, and then an audition alongside a whole cast of candidates from all over the country. Finally they narrowed it down to four groups of four. They chose bands with found members in order to make traveling easier, but maximize the amount of music that you could play. I luckily had a band of people already, so we were basically made for this.

When we came to audition we did our thing the best way we know how and we didn't know what

to expect with such steep competition. Low and behold, only 24 hours after we audition, we were chosen as the very first group that they were going to put on tour.

We were able to choose a continent almost anywhere in the world to tour. I said, "Let's go somewhere that we have never been before and where we could really hope to make a difference; somewhere that we would possibly get a chance to return to as well." We chose South East Asia specifically for those reasons. None of our band members had been to such exotic places and we were excited to travel to Vietnam, Cambodia, Philippines, Papua New Guinea (where I was told I was the first person in history to bring the cello into the country). We also went to Fiji which was breathtaking. We really lucked out weather wise on our tour because we traveled during NY Winter to be met by South East Asian tropical summer!

Before we toured we were told that we should expect minimal audience interaction, and it wouldn't be like the states so we wouldn't see people excited to get up and dance. However, we were very pleasantly surprised when everywhere we went, not only did it the concerts sell out strong with people waiting to get in, but people were excited by the music. I think it just had to do with the type of music that we play. We play music that's really charged up. I call it music for situation, because it's not the sit down and listen type of music that is beautiful, but more like the thing where it's like it's ok to have drink, it ok to say to your friend what you're thinking, and it's ok to yell out when you like the music. Our audiences where climbing up on the stage to dance.

This was a huge surprise because we visited predominantly Buddhist countries where most are vegetarian, very reserved, and respectful. It was amazing because a lot of these people have never been outside of their own city, let alone their own country. They were seeing our American band arrive from the states with a new music that they never heard. If they had heard anything, it was likely a glimpse of commercial television and some expected us to come in with the giant chains, get on stage and drink the champagne, cussing, driving big cars and what not. This expectation is understandable, but it surely does not represent everybody in the states and surely not every musician either.

Plateau: So I think I saw this track with Baba Israel called "Bonified" how did that some about?

Dana Leong: Baba is on my album "Anthems of Life" and he is featured on a track called "One Life" and another titled "Black and White – dedicated to Barry White," where I make a collage of different mc's interacting musically.

The emcee on "Bonefied" is actually Sam Strange, who's worked with Jay-Z and is all over the independent scene. The collabos with Baba started from a friend of ours Jason Lindner who is a keyboard player and great jazz composer from New York City. As musicians we get to travel and play with different people. The scene is amazingly small and if you're good, you're good! Basically I was playing with Jason and he actually knew Baba from years ago and had a weekly gig at this little Jazz club called "Smalls". Baba would come and listen to the music and sometimes he would recite some poetry or freestyle over some of the beats. I said "Wow he's really good" and every time I see somebody I never know when the next time might be so I always try to take advantage of that.

Plateau: So is that something we should see more of from you in collaborating with Hip-Hop artists?

Dana Leong: I always wanted to play the music I'm playing now, combining lyric with groove and now that I've made my first mark that door is wide open. My latest project "MILK & JADE by Dana Leong" is continuing the charged up sounds. It includes MC "Core Rhythm" who is very active in NY and beyond, keyboard guru Adam Platt and my drummer phenomenon from Israel Aviv Cohen. I recently renamed from 'Dana Leong Band', to Milk & Jade by Dana Leong to reflect our particular sound. You'll definitely see a lot more of us on the scene. We have a show coming up in a new 250 seat theater in the West Village of all places right on top of the Café Wha, called the Players Theater. They're presenting a great new concert series "Music on Macdougall" starting this month all the way till the end of the year with all different acts classical, chamber music, the local hip-hop/jazz acts, and theater projects. We are teaming as a co-bill [October 15th] with another group, who did the same Rhythm Road program, from the Bronx, called Universes; a political hip-hop theater group that merges poetry, jazz, music, signing and stage performance....



Plateau: You have also done some acting as well. Is that something we can see doing in the future?

Dana Leong: Right now I'm focused mostly on the music although I wouldn't be opposed later on again. I've been fortunate that a lot of things happen serendipitously. For example I've worn these [grabs beads on his neck] ever since I went on tour in Israel. These wooden beads and people that know me or have seen me know I'm always wearing them and they always bring me good luck. They saved me when I was about to drown, they've held me up. Different things have happened to me where I'm like wow these beads are essential to me. There was a time a few years ago where I had my head shaved and I was walking down the street in New York City and this talent scout from an acting agency was like "You look you could be perfect for this thing I'm working on. Would you like to appear in this TV commercial tomorrow as a monk"? I said sure why not. I can see why you're asking. While I was on that TV project a casting agent for an upcoming Steven Spielberg movie happened to be at that same session and mentioned they needed a musician on screen, so he asked to see some of my stuff. So I gave him some of my stuff and he was like yea we could use. So they used me on a scene on a movie called the "Terminal" and later that same casting agency called me and they wanted me to play and organize an orchestra for a movie called "August Rush" with Robin Williams, Carrie Russell, and Terrence Howard which came out last season. You can catch it on demand. So I put together the whole orchestra for that. As long as it's in the general area and brings attention back to my work in music then yeah I'll do it.

Plateau: What's something that your fans don't know about you?

Dana Leong: One thing people don't know is I love to joke. The people in my band and people that know me know I like to play tricks. Sometimes I wish I had time within every musical set to just tell jokes but I don't want to take too much time away from the music. Another aspect is that I really like to cook but probably the joking thing is a little more interesting.

Plateau: So what can we expect from you in the near future?

Dana Leong: I'm working around the clock on my band "MILK & JADE by Dana Leong". I'm building and writing a brand new album from the ground up. We're kicking off some heavy touring in the next few days starting with and famed Duke Ellington festival in Washington DC, The Players Theater in NYC, and then abroad. The band is jumping off on its first concert tour of Europe in November. We will visit Serbia, Italy, Germany, Finland and Sweden.

In addition to that I'm working a project called "Life after Dark", which is collaborative cross genre music and film project set in my recording studio that you're in now. It combines film with music. We bring artists together whom we feel deserve wider attention. I place them into collaborative environments to work on music. It's about new collaborations which have never existed. The artists who work together and are uniquely different, by filming the process and interviewing each artist you get an inside look at the essence of what each ingredient is brought by each artist. In the final product, we will have a musical album and a mini documentary of the process.

Plateau: So what would you say to the Independent artist coming up because you have a pretty impressive rap sheet?

Dana Leong: Well.... I would say I always try to find a goal and picture it as clearly as possible and try to take the steps backward up to that point. If you know where you want to end up then it's easy to see what the last step is. You can imagine yourself crossing the finish line, then two steps back you can imagine yourself starting to run out of breath and feeling the burn, then three steps behind all the way until you where you are sitting on your chair right here in the day. Sometimes it helps to work backwards.

Plateau: How would you summarize who you are and what you do?

Dana Leong: It would be "natural science" because I'm half man, half machine. I operate like computer. I have a crazy memory and as you can see I'm surround with electric spaghetti wires everywhere and we're interviewing in my recording studio for god sakes. I'm very much in tune with what makes me tick and what I need to feel healthy and feel centered. I also know that I need technology to get the job done but the machines are just tools which function as extensions of my natural body.