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## *Dana Leong: No Boundaries*

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By: Franz A. Matzner

Whether on the cello, trombone or laptop, whether playing straight-up jazz, classical, or the many hybrid concoctions his work has already produced, Dana Leong seems to acknowledge no boundaries. He has worked with a wide range of players, holds down the cello chair for the Paquito D'Rivera trio, has just released a second album fusing jazz with hip-hop, runs a recording studio, shows up in Hollywood films, and is currently touring as an artistic ambassador with the State Department Rhythm Road Program.

All About Jazz recently had the pleasure of speaking with Leong via phone from his apartment in New York following the latest leg of the tour.

**All About Jazz:** You have a lot going on. You are touring as a musical ambassador with Jazz at Lincoln Center and the State Department, you have two albums out, both having received critical praise, and you're gigging with a veritable who's who. And you make it seem so natural and easy. So the question is, was it ever hard?

**Dana Leong:** (Laughs) Oh man, yeah. Of course. It's difficult every day. (Pauses) But I myself find comfort hearing that people I admire struggle as well. Things may sparkle on the outside, but they'll say the exact same things that I'll say. They might be tired of working on more business than music at times—that they wish it could be more pure music or more pure art. It's encouraging at the same time as frustrating. It's a communal thing.

**AAJ:** You were immersed in music from early on. Your mother was a piano teacher, your brother was preparing for a career in classical music. Did you ever want to rebel, just throw the instruments away and say, "I want to be a lawyer! I want to be an accountant!"

**DL:** (Laughs) Right. Well I definitely did have moments where I wanted to stop, when I wanted to quit. But I didn't necessarily know what else I would do. At an early age I just wanted to have the same type of freedoms the other kids that I knew had. When I was eight years old, kids would come home from school and hang out, play sports, run around outside, and I would be working on musical assignments every day for, you know, not an insane amount of time, but an hour, a couple hours a day. Then I could go out and do the things other kids could do. But I kept

asking my mom, “Why can't I do what my friend up the street does? He goes home and plays baseball or is in a little league thing.” She said, “Well, you're not that kid and I'm not his mom, so we're going to do what we do.” (Laughs) By the time I got to high school though, she let the reins loose a little bit, and I was into sports, cars, fashion, and all—just a regular kid in the Bay area.

By the time I graduated high school, I was either going to go into track and field at Stanford and stay in the Bay area or study biology and follow in my father's footsteps and go into science—or move out of the state and go into music. Ultimately it was my own decision after thinking of all the different possible avenues and whether it was really worth it to go into music as a lifelong profession, or even to move out of the Bay area unlike most of my peers. At the last minute I decided to go for it. Move to New York City, go to the conservatory, and push it all the way from there.

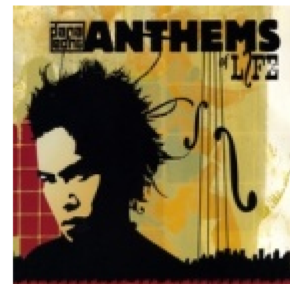
**AAJ:** Seems like it paid off.

**DL:** It's working out. So far. Like I said, every day is a new day. Still a lot of goals and a long way to go, but you know, things are going very, very well and I'm really pleased.

**AAJ:** So you grew up in the Bay area. And you're of Chinese and Japanese descent, is that correct?

**DL:** My mother was born in Japan, and my father is Chinese.

**AAJ:** Do you still have family in Japan? Did you have a lot of connection with your Japanese heritage growing up, or like the rest of us, are you pretty much here and just “American.”




**DL:** I would think more the latter, actually—though I did visit Japan once a year. That was most of what encapsulated my Japanese culture. I did go to Japanese school for Japanese-Americans for a couple of years and learned to read and write a tiny bit, at a very rudimentary level. (Laughs)

**AAJ:** It must have been interesting getting to go to Japan once a year and getting that experience.

**DL:** Sure, sure. I totally love it there. I've said it many times to many of my friends. I firmly stand by the statement. I think Japan is the most different place on earth from the United States.

**AAJ:** I had a similar experience there. There are a lot of big-picture, surface similarities. Big economies, consumer culture, and we obviously have a strong relationship with each other. But to me I found when I was there—and particularly when I came back—that the overall aesthetic culture is so strong and so different that there is nothing else like it. There is no analog, and it really changes your perception.

**DL:** Sure. Absolutely. It has to do with the many centuries of isolation. It is just a different mindset. The way they can animate inanimate objects, with technology and voices, and just their overall view of the relationship between the land and themselves. You'll find old ladies vacuuming the subway platforms every night. You'll have the toilet thanking you for your deposit. It's like, “Ok, ok.” There is also definitely a preservation culture. I just started to really think about that as well—after centuries of isolation, being an island separate from everything

else, developing a separate cultural identity. I think it was slightly recharged by the actions during the war. I didn't even realize it until recently, didn't really [think] about it—Japan is the only place in history where a nuclear bomb had detonated on earth and affected live humans. I think that may have something to do with recharging the deepest isolation of feelings of cultural exchange.

**AAJ:** I want to go back a minute to when you were growing up. Your brother played violin, and you started on violin as well, but quickly your mother gave you a cello and soon thereafter, a trombone. Now those are very different instruments. Most people would say, wow, they have nothing in common. But if I am not mistaken, they actually do have some similarities.

**DL:** Both instruments are in the same range, so they have the same low and high points in their note range. As well, they are the only two instruments in the orchestral family which read all four of the written musical clefs, which would parallel to a choir. They play very high sometimes, you can play in the treble clef, and they play in the alto range, the mezzo soprano, high male, low female voice, as well as the tenor and bass clef.

**AAJ:** So that provides on both instruments a high degree of flexibility.

**DL:** Right. A full spectrum. And extra training on reading and comprehension.

**AAJ:** So very challenging instruments, but once you are involved with them, they give you real range.

**DL:** There's another thing that I slowly started to realize. I'm the type of person who likes to do puzzles, and challenges, and try to figure things out. I think one of the main reasons I keep sticking to both of the instruments is there's a high margin for error. It's not like the fingerboard of a guitar or a violin where the notes are right under your fingers and you are moving very close. There's three-and-a-half feet of string there! And only one *tiny* little right note.

**AAJ:** As you advanced on the instruments, did a lot of sibling rivalry develop?

**DL:** My mom did a good job of separating us before any of that really started happening, before there was any outside comparison being made. My brother is about three-and-a-half years older than I am, and from the get-go, he had quite a few extra years' experience on me. So I pretty much looked to him as the pace car. And he played trumpet too, so I could learn from him on both instruments.

**AAJ:** Did he continue on with music as well?

**DL:**He does, actually. He's playing professionally in the Bay area right now with a couple of the orchestras out there—the opera orchestra, the ballet, he teaches a lot of students, has his own string quartet. He's doing the whole thing—travel, tours. But he's doing all classical music.

**AAJ:** So, obviously, you changed at some point from classical to jazz and other forms. But I have also seen you confess to an early obsession with heavy metal?

**DL:** Oh yeah, sure.

**AAJ:** What were your favorites?

**DL:** Let's see. First off would be early Metallica. You know, Master of Puppets. AC/DC. [Also] current things. Since I own my own studio, I'm really into checking out production, size of sound as it comes out of speakers or headphones. A band like Evanescence actually strikes me a lot because they have a very classical sound, but then they mix it with Metal and Goth. Huge dramatic production, and it just sounds humongous when it comes through the speakers. It's sparkling and huge.

**AAJ:** I'm glad to hear the interest in metal didn't just die in the 80's.

**DL:** (Laughs) Right!

**AAJ:** How did all that evolve into jazz and hip-hop?

**DL:** I studied classical cello, and I studied jazz on trombone. When I got to college, that's what I decided to continue with. I did a degree playing jazz trombone at Manhattan School of Music but was also studying orchestral cello and all the solo literature. And then at that point, I had thought about the idea of doing the opposite on both instruments. But I didn't really do the work yet. So my college years were very important to form the crossover on both instruments, where I started to learn how to play jazz and other styles on the cello.

Basically, by directly transferring the things that I had learned about playing on the trombone, as well as injecting things that I saw from people playing electric basses and upright basses, and guitar, percussion, world instruments ... All these things started pouring in to the way that I would approach the instrument. And the same on trombone—the way people beatbox in hip-hop started coming in to the way I approached the instrument. Those things really affected the way I learned the instrument.

**AAJ:** Now, you're obviously pushing the envelope stylistically, but you also appear to be pushing the envelope of the instruments themselves. Can you talk a little about your experiments with the mechanics of the cello? For those who haven't seen your playing, I'm thinking of things like picking below the bridge, using the body of the cello percussively ... things like that.

**DL:** It comes from a situation where there is already a desired result, and I work backwards to find a solution to the problem. I like certain sounds, for example, from the Far East, like the koto. And I found there is a certain way you can pluck the strings of the cello—and the positioning of your fingers—that emulates that sound. Nobody would ever believe that it's a cello until you see it.

**AAJ:** I did notice that there are times in your playing when it did shift dramatically to sound like a koto, or times when it sounded very much like an erhu.

**DL:** Yes, that's right.

**AAJ:** So these are deliberate analogs you are trying to create?

**DL:** Yes. Absolutely. That and the sounds of the theremin—way up high sliding around, those harmonics that you can manipulate on the strings when you are cutting the distance, so that you hear something that is two, three octaves higher than the fundamental tone of the strings.

A lot of techniques I've seen and borrowed from electric bass and guitar playing, from upright bass, sort of simultaneously. Like the two-fingered hand pizzicato that I just saw so many bass players using when they solo or play up-tempo music. I had to do that rather than the orchestral style which is one finger, and every time you pluck the string the hand comes off and it resonates and pushes the sound out. Instead, my hand is planted at the bass of the finger board. I watched a lot of bass players. As far as picking and playing more chordal stuff—I watched Richard Bona and the way he navigates the bass with a finger-picking style instead of a traditional style. He's more like a guitar player.

**AAJ:** This is something that really distinguishes your work—the way your fusing of different techniques mirrors your fusing of various styles and traditions, including the very prominent use of more modern genres, particularly hip-hop. How did that come about?

**DL:** It was really not as much a conscious decision. I grew up in the Bay area listening to that music. That music was the first music I really enjoyed outside of [what] I was studying. The pop and R&B and hip-hop of the early 90's in San Francisco—at that time they were playing what I feel was the heyday of hip-hop—Notorious B.I.G., Tupac, Dr. Dre, lots of great singers, good production, good music. That just stuck in my mind as a big musical ingredient where I am from. I think it affected the way I ended up playing my instruments. The way that I ended up playing jazz had to do with the fact that I'm from the West Coast, born in the 80's.

By the time I finished college, I wanted to do something that reflected all the music that I had studied, and basically I saw things more in two categories: Music that you could present in a hall or any situation where the audience is meant to be listening, where most of the time they would be stationary and less interactive. And the other style, which I like to say, is for situations: standing, dancing, drinking, interacting with the music and each other. I wanted to put out a work that reflected the first. That is what happened with *Leaving New York*. It was more composition-based—there was improvisation but it was rooted in presentational music. And then the newer album, which just came out, *Anthems of Life*—I wanted to do that pretty much at the same time. But logistically, I could only get one done and went with what was fresh in my mind and then revisited the other work.

**AAJ:** So these are the two sides of that frame: presentational and situational music. Again, a very deliberate and intriguing way of presenting the music. I'm quite interested in that side of your music, the way you're creating an image and framing the delivery. I think a lot of jazz musicians are not as conscious of image—which I guess can be a good thing sometimes. And then at the opposite extreme you have hip-hop, which some might argue is too image driven. I mean, we're seeing stories now about artists using...

**DL:** Steroids.

**AAJ:** Right. So if hip-hop suffers from an image problem, does jazz suffer from a "no-image" problem?

**DL:** Actually, that's funny. Someone just asked me that not 24 hours ago. Or that was my answer to the question, what does jazz have to learn from hip-hop and vice-versa. I think it's happening naturally. Hip-hop is learning that it doesn't necessarily have to be solo artist-centric music about a certain guy and his lifestyle. It can really be about the music. And people are also learning about the effect of live music. They are seeing what it is like to combine live elements on stage. Vice-versa for jazz. I think people are starting to see the importance of at least the consciousness of your image.

**AAJ:** The last time you were in Washington, DC, you were with Paquito D'Rivera for the Duke Ellington Festival. I'm curious how you became involved with Paquito?

**DL:** I was introduced to Paquito through his former pianist Alon [Yavnai]. I think it was one day when they had just finished a recording—with Yo-Yo Ma and Mark Summer, who is the cellist with the Turtle Island String Quartet. But they were looking for somebody who could play live with them, because both of those guys are pretty busy with their own projects. So Alon recommended me to Paquito, and Paquito invited me over to his house. We hung out and had a very, very informal audition of reading through some music and sort of hanging out for a day, and that's how we became introduced.

**AAJ:** He's such an amazing figure. You obviously work collaboratively on these projects, but I imagine there are lots of things you've been able to learn from him. Is there anything that particularly stands out?

**DL:** You know that very thing we were just speaking about: consciousness of image. He's definitely one of those people that is just a conscious person in general. He's aware of who's around, what the purpose of the performance is, who we are playing to, how we are going to shape the music into a presentation that people are going to enjoy.

**AAJ:** He's come to DC a few times with different groups, and I've always been impressed by his willingness to insert these very humorous, but very pointedly political comments. Now some people say politics and art don't mix at all—for some it's like peanut butter and chocolate.

**DL:** I do definitely see the relationship, and definitely the importance and the overall power of the presence of art. But there's a very fine line between pure intention and something that might be slightly manipulative—which is why we were very happy to go on this last tour with the State Department. But we also made sure to ask the right questions beforehand to make sure. Where are we visiting? And from the political standpoint, what are we supporting? Are we going as part of an artistic endeavor, or a personal mission, or certain political causes? Those things need to be considered.

**AAJ:** Can you explain what you meant by pure intention, and can you give an example of how that would be lost and become instead manipulative?

**DL:** Music used to propagate war has always been one of the areas where I feel that art is misused. From something as subliminal as using uplifting music to solicit people to enlist in the

army, to sending musicians to perform in “war torn” lands, either to support troops or as “a gift” to make amends with the local people. A second issue to which I have been sensitive is the use of popular people to market products to children. It does not make sense to me to deliver a skewed message to young minds who may otherwise not know the quality of a product—until it is too late.

**AAJ:** Let's talk about the State Department tour for a minute that you just mentioned. How did you get involved in it?

**DL:** Actually, there is an audition process that is pretty lengthy. First round, there is a written application. If that looks good on paper, letters of recommendation, all sorts of statements of why you want to go, what assets you bring. After that, you get into the musical aspects. You send a CD and a press packet. After that, there are a couple rounds of live audiences, and they select a couple bands to be interviewed.

**AAJ:** What drew you to going through all of that?

**DL:** First and foremost, my biggest dream is to get outside my immediate area and play the music that I'm creating. We are not creating music so we can play it in the confines of the island of Manhattan. We want to get out there and share the music.

**AAJ:** This last leg was in Southeast Asia, right?

**DL:** Yes. We started in Fiji then went to Papua New Guinea, which is interesting because I was the very first person in history to bring an acoustic cello into the country—or so I was told. So I can go down in the books now for something!

**AAJ:** What were some of the highlights of this trip?

**DL:** Definitely personal relationships of all different kinds. We made personal connections with people that work in the U.S. government abroad, as well as meeting natives from the countries we were visiting of all different types—people way high up in the government to school children. Just people in public that were passing by the concerts and came in to take a look. We met young, young children, all the way up to college kids. You name it.

It was really a lot, everyday, the fact that we got to bring our music abroad into these beautiful settings. We were the final performance at the Saigon Opera Hall before they renovated it. And they hadn't renovated it for like fifty, sixty years. And it took a lot of string-pulling, but they were able to keep it open one extra night, so that while we were touring, we played in the original configuration before they gutted it and put in new seats, stage. Things like that. Historic venues filled with local people who had never heard of our music or were only recently introduced through TV or radio—that was extremely special for us.