

Rock-Hop, Nu-Jazz  
and Plain Old Funk

# Dana Leong

by TYLER MERCERON

At 27 years of age, Dana Leong's talents are sought after by the likes of Beyoncé, Evanescence and Alanis Morissette, amongst others. Often appearing with 8-time Grammy Award winner Paquito D'Rivera's Trio, Dana's sound is described as "a fusion of computerized electronic hip-hop funk rhythms and rock propulsions." Having played at this country's most prestigious concert halls and venues, critics consider Dana's mastery of the cello and trombone to border upon genius.

#### Tell us a little about your family.

I was born near San Francisco, California. My father is Chinese American and was born in San Francisco, and my mother is Japanese American from northern Japan. She is a professional pianist and my older brother is also a musician who plays the violin and trumpet.

#### You started sitting at the piano at the age of one and began performing and competing internationally at age eight. What kind of kid were you?

Early on, I spent a lot of time with my mother practicing music. Spending most of your time with either of your parents can become frustrating, especially when working with an emotional craft like music. Luckily, my mother sensed this and by the time I turned six sent me to study with other music teachers. Later, instead of pushing me intensely, she let me decide how to spend my time. I was a pretty crazy teenager who was into racing cars, meeting and observing people, socializing, and exploring new places.

#### You are often described as being a child prodigy and somewhat of a musical genius. Has this placed undue pressure upon you?

The more you pay attention to labels, the harder it becomes to remain unrestricted and creative. Of course, I feel pressure trying to live up to the reviews, constantly striving to top my last creation. This is the beauty of being an artist. You have a short time on earth, so you may as well take advantage of every moment.

#### Originally trained in classical and traditional music, what inspired you to pursue hip-hop, funk and jazz?

Most kids in California are exposed to the west coast hip-hop movement created by such icons as Snoop Dogg, Dr. Dre, Dogg Pound, DJ Quick, Tupac, and Ice Cube. It was impossible for me not to be heavily influenced by it, musically and in life, in general. Being classically trained definitely helped me because the discipline and structure embedded in the classical tradition carries across genres and into other disciplines in life.

#### Who has most influenced the evolution of your distinctive sound?

I draw inspiration from the musicians with whom I work. Presently, my solo project, "Dana Leong Band", includes three other very accomplished musicians who also compose music. We constantly inspire each other and share music collections. Also, I am teaching college students from whom I gain tons of inspiration and exposure to new influences. They always have original ideas.

#### Your sound has the urban feel of New York interspersed with a relaxed feel of California and other various textures. If you had to give your sound a name, what would it be?

Genre names I've toyed with are rock-hop, nu-jazz, and just plain old funk.

#### Your compositions are very soulful and energetic. What inspires you?

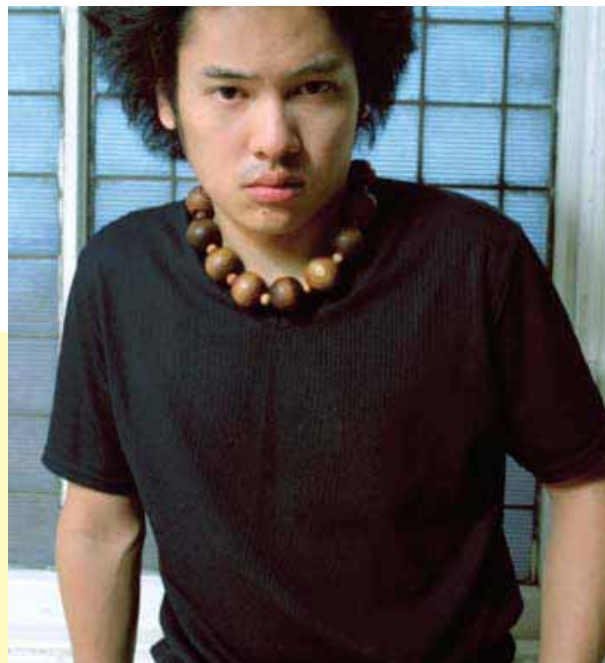
I love it when inspiration comes to me at unexpected times. Lately, I've found lots of it on airplanes. I am not quite sure why, but the music just starts flowing in my head once we leave the ground.

#### You've worked with many big names in the music, including virtuoso cellist Yo-Yo Ma, renowned bassist Christian McBride, and Grammy winning clarinetist, Paquito D'Rivera. Were any more inspiring than the others?

As you would expect, every person I work with brings something different to the table. Someone does not have to be famous to have a significant impact in life. However, when I do hang out and work with artists as renowned as the aforementioned, I pay close attention to many aspects that help me build my musicality, leadership skills and tactics to handle high-pressure situations.

#### Who would you consider to be the significant people who have shaped the person you are today?

I wouldn't be here today without my parents and I probably wouldn't be a musician, either. My family is first, for sure. Growing up with an older brother who is also into music made it easier to set the bar high as there was always



someone very close by who had more experience than I.

#### You arrived in NYC in 1998 and your debut album was curiously called *Leaving New York*. Where were you going?

The title *Leaving New York* is symbolic. It embodies the idea that we create music for everyone (not just for the people on the small island of Manhattan.) Our dream of composing music and performing it around the world is slowly beginning to come true.

#### How strongly do your Asian roots impact your thoughts and compositions?

Growing up in California with its big Asian community, I think our sense of pride is drawn more from the comfort of being surrounded by familiar faces than our connection to Asia. Although I do explore my culture, I don't make a point of it nor do I feel that it is a necessity to have Asian elements in my music. However, I do see the importance of celebrating the Asian American community and building our history and heritage in this country. I also believe that what I do shows children of all origins that you should not place restrictions upon your creativity or expression, especially in music.

#### What is next in your career? Where do you see yourself in five years?

I've always had a great respect and admiration for artists such as Carlos Santana and Yo-Yo Ma. They bring instruments into a larger arena and collaborate seamlessly with many different types of artists. I hope to be headed down a similar path.

#### As a fusion artist, you must be in to all kinds of music. What's on your iPod playlist?

For Starters: Keith Jarrett Trio, rough drafts and works in progress of my own music, Eminem, Avril Lavigne, stand up comedy by Chris Rock – Russell Peters – Dave Chapelle – Brian Regan, Old Heavy Metal by CKY – Metallica, Method Man and Redman, and Sam Cooke.

#### You've appeared in movies (*The Terminal*) and on television (*Law & Order*). Is an acting career in your future?

Though I love acting and being a part of any theatrical production, I want music to remain my focus. I've had dreams of what it would be like to be a famous actor or even a standup comedian, but I think those dreams will remain in my fantasy world for the time being.

#### How would you describe your fashion style?

I am a slow shopper, waiting till I see something I really love and then I jump on it. If you can believe it, I don't own a single pair of jeans! When I moved to New York, I was all about them but I kept finding myself underdressed for many occasions. I'm into all sorts of designers. One thing I will say, I'm a freak for sunglasses. I love glasses by Louis Vuitton, Fred, Alain Mikli, Armani, and the list goes on. I'd say my style is an upscale, slightly twisted reality.

#### You play the electric guitar, trumpet and bass trumpet, as well as trombone and cello. What is your favorite instrument?

Although I play a few instruments, I still love the sensation and sound of sitting down and playing a fine piano. I don't claim to be great at it but it really is fun and I am in love with the sound.

#### What would surprise people about you?

I really can cook and I have a pet turtle.

#### What is the life of a musician really like?

It is a special gift to be able to live on my own schedule and make a living by creating sounds. Though it is tough to find continuing inspiration as your own boss, you see a lot of the world and meet great people from all over the place. That is the part I love the best!

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