

DOWNBEAT

Players

Dana Leong ; Global Production Science

Last winter, Dana Leong embarked on his longest tour ever: six-and-a-half-weeks through eight Southeast Asian countries with his working quartet. The group framed vocalist Baba Israel's gritty hip-hop verses with deep grooves and virtuoso blowing by Leong on the cello and trombone.

To hear Leong generate such populist fare—he auditioned for the U.S. State Department-sponsored tour as an “urban” act—might surprise jazz devotees impressed with his far-flung improvisations and spot-on ensemble playing with Steve Coleman, Henry Threadgill, Paquito D’Rivera and Dafnis Prieto over the past decade. But for Leong, whose self-produced and self-released albums *Leaving New York* and *Anthems Of Life* contain this sound, such cross-genre mixing is, he said, “a logical extension from my past.”

Leong’s gear-stocked basement studio in upper Manhattan serves as the nerve center of Tateo Sound, the production company he formed in 2003. He sat there on a spring afternoon to

present his most recent project, “Life After Dark,” in which he sets up unusual configurations for his favorite musicians, documenting the process with behind-the-scenes videos. In episode one, Pyeng Threadgill sings a song by noise bassist Trevor Dunn with rock guitarist John Shannon and drummer Aviv Cohen. A forthcoming collaboration triangulates Leong on cello, harpist Edmar Castaneda and a shakuhachi flutist. On another, he performs with Castaneda, koto player Miya Masaoka and percussionist Khalil Kwame Bell.

“By creating a collaborative album and posting it digitally, using a tune structure, you’re able to track singles,” Leong said. “If one particular collaboration is selling, you can make an entire album, even if it’s barking dogs and birthday whistles.”

Leong cited hip-hop guru Dr. Dre as a role model. “When he first arrived on the scene, he brought with him an entire community, and he still keeps that same community of people,” he said. “It only brings more attention to his production ability and merit as an artist.”

West Coast hip-hop was one of several scenes that Leong, 28, traversed during formative years in the San Francisco Bay Area. A cel-



JOHN WALDBER

list in youth orchestras under Michael Tilson Thomas and a student of the principal trombonist of the San Francisco Symphony, Leong spent summers at jazz camps, meeting Coleman, Prieto and Yosvany Terry at Stanford Jazz Workshop sessions. By high school, he played trombone in the Clayton–Hamilton Jazz Orchestra and in local pickup orchestras assembled to play concerts by the likes of Barry White, Ray Charles and Björk. Given his proclivity for speculative improvising and his Chinese–Japanese ancestry, one might assume that he established early links to the Bay Area’s Asian improv community. However, Leong said, “I grew up with a sterile musical education. I didn’t even know who Henry Threadgill was until I set foot in New York City.”

That year was 1998, when Leong studied at the Manhattan School of Music, where bass trombonist David Taylor immediately gave him a Threadgill record to peruse.

“My thought process was always even and logical, and asymmetrical things sounded strange,” he said. “In New York, that attitude dissolved, and I started to see art as an experimental medium. I see Henry and Steve Coleman as modern scientists—they create hypotheses,

do experiments, and document the results.”

During his first 18 months at the Manhattan School, Leong served as principal cellist in the senior orchestra, played trombone on salsa and Latin jazz gigs and deployed his arsenal as a session musician for Sean Combs’ Bad Boy label behind artists like Marc Anthony and Lil’ Kim.

“I’d get ridiculous calls at the most inopportune times, and it was all-or-nothing—do the job, or the two-dozen people who are dying for it will take it,” Leong said. “I wasn’t building anything for myself, so I bowed out, and started conceptualizing how I could do my own publishing, music and performances rather than be a desirable accessory to a larger corporation.”

Toward this end, he plans to apply his recent Southeast Asia experience.

“I found my bottom line, the absolute minimum I need on my person to play the shows,” he said. “I learned to interact with different people, to manage personalities and egos—two band members were vegans, and it was on me and the promoters to find what they needed. I learned to pace myself—this is hard music, highly electrified, an extremely physical show. Nobody can or should be more committed to my project than me.”

—Ted Panken