

A Place to Grow at SJW

by Dana Leong, cellist, trombonist, Workshop alum & SJW Faculty

Cellist/Trombonist/Composer Dana Leong fuses hip-hop, jazz and electronics to create a signature boundless sound. Often referred to as a "hi-def Yo-Yo Ma," Dana's pioneering fusion of electronic music and ethereal jazz has garnered critical acclaim and wowed audiences worldwide. Whether as a performer, composer, collaborator, or recording producer, he has worked with top artists including Dafnis Prieto, Ryuichi Sakamoto, Wynton Marsalis, Yoko Ono, and Kanye West, to name a few. Dana's genre-bending quartet, MILK & JADE by Dana Leong, has received worldwide acclaim performing sold out shows at jazz festivals in Sweden, Italy, Germany, Finland, Slovenia, Serbia, Austria, Ireland, Mexico, Macau, and China. In 2008, the band served as an American musical ambassador overseas as part of "The Rhythm Road: American Music Abroad" program, produced in conjunction with Jazz at Lincoln Center and the U.S. Department of State Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. An Asian-American artist of Chinese and Japanese descent, Dana studied both classical cello and jazz trombone on double scholarships at Manhattan School of Music. As an official Yamaha artist, Dana gives clinics and workshops around the globe on the use of electronics with cello and trombone, and his unique genre-bending composition techniques.



Following Dana's article are links with information about his new self-titled CD and his upcoming concert at [Symphony Space in NY on March 5](#).

Hello Friends and Family of Stanford Jazz Workshop,

Dana Leong, cellist, trombonist, composer, and former student turned faculty of SJW writing here! I was both flattered and honored to be asked to write about my many experiences at the Workshop, and had to sit for a good while before deciding exactly which experiences to share.

These days, my 'average day' consists of what most folks refer to as 'keeping many balls in the air.' Growing a career in music is similar to one of those entertaining movie scenes where the main character steps into a tiny town and sees **one** guy playing the part of the mayor, the post master, the chef, the bartender, the banker, the bus driver, the locksmith etc. I will usually get up as early as I can, start up my computers and phones, and get cracking! In order to simply maintain the number of musical events at which I perform, I usually deal with anywhere from 10-100 e-mails a day, make 10-30 telephone calls, balance books, and PAY musicians! If I am interested in creating **growth** in my operations (as opposed to simply maintaining my position), I can add mailing/emailing 2-5 outgoing demo packages, making contact with new people (musicians/artistic collaborators, bookers, radio folks, venue owners), and **practicing music**, to my ever growing list of to-do's and activities. Oddly enough, after reviewing a list of tasks like the aforementioned, it may even seem that one's level of musicianship is the least important element in their developmental structure. However we all know it is absolutely the contrary! Bottom line, I work in **music** and the product is **me**. It all starts with the sound of music, and this particular story begins in our home in the San Francisco Bay Area.

At the young and impressionable age of 10, my mother enrolled my elder brother in the Jazz Camp and kindly asked if I could also *tag along*. When I tell you that this would be my birthplace in jazz music, there is no stretching of truth whatsoever. I had been playing trombone and cello for roughly 2 years, taking private classical lessons and participating in the public school music program. After my first day at the Workshop, I believe most of the faculty had mentioned that my trombone was taller than I! I particularly remember feeling insecure about the looks of my raggedy old trombone, which I was borrowing from my elementary school, and how heavy it felt to lug it around in its giant wooden case. My first memorable and defining moment was when SJW Faculty tenor saxophonist John McKenna invited me to join him in the Braun Music Center Courtyard and 'jam.' At the time, my arms simply were not long enough to reach the farthest notes on the trombone slide, and I remember us laughing about that. However one of the things he mentioned to me that summer afternoon changed my outlook on music and instruments to this day.

"Hey, that's a nice horn you have there. You're lucky to have it!" said McKenna. "Wow, really? Do you really think this old beat up trombone is a good one?" I replied. "Yes indeed, a lot of times, the older instruments are the better ones. They have character, and great tone. It's not at all how the instrument **looks**, but instead, how it feels and **sounds**! Look at my saxophone, it's 40 years old, and isn't much to look at, but I **love** the way it sounds!" he explained.

That wonderful old trombone stayed with me for a number of years to follow, and I have Mr. McKenna to thank for giving me a great reason to continue to grow with it.

As I continued in music, attending Stanford Jazz Workshop became a ritual for me every summer. I would be introduced to tons of new music, and also made many musical friends, whom I keep close to this day. Having spent the past 20 years at SJW, first as a student then later as faculty, I can recall countless memories and inspiring moments that have helped me grow and that I enjoy sharing with students, friends, and audiences. One moment where I was most impressed, was when Mr. Jim Nadel, Mr. Bob Murphy, and Mr. Wayne Wallace (my former trombone teacher!) all worked together to bring musicians from Cuba to the Workshop. I first remember rumors of a saxophonist of giant musical proportions being spread around the community. A man with 'chops of steel,' 'a whole new language of improvisation,' 'a rhythmic concept to baffle the most advanced numerologists,' was scheduled to attend the workshop as a faculty member. That man is our beloved Yosvany Terry. Closely followed thereafter by other Cuban musical giants (violinist percussionist – "Pancho" Terry, drum set phenomenon - Dafnis Prieto, violinist bassist - Yuniory Terry, and pianist - Roberto Carcassés), Yosvany was the first of the "Cuban Contingency" to come to the Bay Area to share great times in music at the Jazz Workshop. As I had been promised, I clearly remember being **dumbfounded** by the musicianship and excitement of Mr. Terry's performances, and later would be thrilled to play alongside him at the Workshop and worldwide (with Dafnis Prieto's Grammy-nominated "Absolute Quintet" 2006, Steve Coleman's "Lucidarium" album and touring group 2004, Claudia Acuna's touring group 2002-present, and way back when with "Steve Turre & Friends" Dinkelspiel Auditorium 1999). Yosvany's personality is 'the calm before the storm,' and those that know him will agree that his soft-spoken, articulate style of speech and teaching is in complete contrast to the absolute **fire** that emits from his musical performance. While it was obvious to me that I would learn a lot from spending time with folks like him, it was also a comforting reality check to watch Yosvany learning and being inspired by other faculty and students in a similar way. Being present to witness one of the first musical collaborations between Yosvany and fellow saxophonist Steve Coleman was a cathartic and spiritual experience. The two men shared more in the language of music than they could in their mother tongues of Spanish and English respectively, but when they played together there was an incredible fluency. I was thrilled to be a part of that history!

Throughout the years, I have been so very proud to be associated with the incredibly deserving growth of Stanford Jazz Workshop, whether as a student under the laser tight direction of Ndugu Chancler, anticipating the arrival of legends (such as Ray Brown, Christian McBride, McCoy Tyner), vibrating musically with the 'cats' at the evening CoHo Jams, or in the more recent years leading my own groups (student and faculty) center stage at Dinkelspiel Auditorium. But don't just take my word for it, become active in the community! Support great live music through the education of developing talent, and watch the future become a place we all love!

Wishing you well,
Dana Leong

Pictured: Dana Leong. Photo Credit, Matt Szwajkos.