

Lisa Sokolov Q&A with Don Lucoff

1. How does music therapy apply and/or influence your artistry?

My experience of working with others through music has deepened my awe of music as an expressive language and its power and capacity to communicate and connect us with each other and with our own humanity. The development and refinement of my capacity to listen in this work has also opened many doors for me as a musician. In addition, the music that I have heard from the many people that I have worked with has been inspiring, and has taught me something about singing from an essential place.

2. Tell our readers about your experience as a lay cantor?

When an opportunity came for me 8 years ago to cantor with a community rabbi I didn't hesitate, as it seemed a natural next step in my path as a singer. It gave me an opportunity to explore the embodiment of pure unadulterated praise through singing. What a joy this is. It gave me an opportunity to begin learning a new language and a new body of music. Suddenly I had to really practice to learn all of this material. I welcomed that sense of being a beginner again. I also love to create new settings for these old melodies that live in my DNA.

As for context, people come into a service with an intention to touch into their soul. This is a rich and fertile ground to offer music within an experience of community flying with you.

3. I see that you recorded Kol Nidre How does your work as a lay cantor influence your music?

What a beautiful thing to be able to enter into the realm of this music with my son Jake on cello. When we are improvising together or playing one of my compositions, we are playing off of each other and listening to what the piece of music is calling for. Music as "offering" requires a different attitude of listening. In this context we are together, listening to something higher as we play this music. It is a subtle but real difference.

I have always known singing as a path of communication between myself and the realm of the spirit. I have become more fearless, more grounded and more open in that conversation as a result of my experiences as a cantor. Coltrane knew this path. Gospel singers know it.. It is a scary and exhilarating realm of musical expression.

4. How do you come to choose these players on the cd?

I hear what these songs need and then I hear who the players are. Cameron, Gerry, John and I have been working together for many years. We have real communication musically. They all have amazing ears. They are flexible, nuanced and masterful musicians.

When I was hearing these tunes in my mind I kept hearing string players. I had worked with Todd Reynolds in other contexts and I knew his brilliant craft and subtlety. It was a natural call to invite him in with us. I love the interplay between us. He was instantly at home.

5. How do you see yourself fitting into the vocal jazz continuum? Or do you see yourself outside of it?

I see myself in the lineage of Coltrane, Rahsaan Roland Kirk, Betty Carter, Laura Nyro, and Jeanne Lee. While people can sometimes be uncomfortable about the fearless woman voice, all you have to do is listen to Mahalia Jackson, to Nusrat Fatah Ali Khan, to Janis Joplin, to the calling out of Coltrane's horn.

I was lucky to study with trumpeter Bill Dixon, drummer Milford Graves and alto player Jimmy Lyons. As a singer in their ensembles I was part of the horn section. No mics, just one of the horns. Coming out of school I found William Parker and the downtown jazz world. I got the chance to sing with Cecil Taylor. Man, that singing is like surfing on the tsunami where creation began. This is the line, the continuum that I have come from.

6. Through your teaching what are some things you hear are missing?

Some people have forgotten how to play. I mean really play. When you see children who still know how to play, (and sadly many don't) it is amazing their presence in the moment, their suspension of disbelief, the unfurling surprising twists and depths of creativity.

We play music. Often people are afraid what do they sound like, are they acceptable? Their singing can be self conscious, from outside in, rather than singing from the center of their beings, inside out. What is it like to sing from your entire self, entire alive? This is what I am interested in. This is what I teach my students.

7. What do you like to do when you are not singing or teaching?

I love to cook. I am not into cookbooks. Sometimes I dream recipes. It is a whole lot like singing. I love to cook for people. This is very satisfying. I have my grandmother's old mahogany table that sits 14. It is always open to capacity and we use it well and fully. I love to be with my kids and my man and our friends and family around that table.

I love color and tone. I love to draw and paint. I like to draw what I see just like I love to sing what I hear. The cover of the CD is a painting of mine. I like that this reflection of myself is on the cover rather than a posed photo.