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LISA SOKOLOV

TEACHING SACRED KNOWLEDGE: MUSIC HEALS

BY JEFF CEBULSKI

An uninhibited vocalist, composer, educator and author of Embodied VoiceWork: Beyond Singing, Lisa Sokolov was surrounded by jazz at home and introduced to John Coltrane's music in high school, leading her to a non-conventional music education at Bennington College with trumpeter Bill Dixon, drummer-percussionist Milford Graves and alto saxophonist Jimmy Lyons. Landing back in New York City to begin music therapy training, she caught the attention of arts community builder and dancer Patricia Nicholson Parker and began a remarkable, non-commercial singing career with collaborations that included Jeanne Lee, William Parker and Cecil Taylor. The progenitor of Embodied VoiceWork®, a method of voice improvisation that marks her as a pioneer in music therapy, the newly-turned septuagenarian Sokolov is a professor at NYC's Tisch School of the Arts and a truly unique artist and resource.

THE NEW YORK CITY JAZZ RECORD: You had quite a remarkable musical upbringing, starting with your family.

LISA SOKOLOV: I come from a lineage of artists. My mother was a sculptor. And on my mother's line, my great grandfather, an Austrian Jew, whom I was named after, was a singer, and on my father's Russian Jewish line my grandmother was a dancer with Isadora Duncan. My favorite aunt sang in the Jewish Theater on Second Avenue. The choreographer Anna Sokolov was a cousin. My dad played stride piano and was devoted to Art Tatum, which was the soundtrack of my childhood; I tried to open his mind to Thelonious Monk but he wouldn't have it. The piano was always my sanctuary and my connection to expression and to the Invisible. I was into choral singing and theater. I had my first trio when I was in high school. One day a teacher, John Gilmore [not be confused with the Sun Ra Arkestra tenor saxophonist], who taught conducting in a public school, said, "Sokolov, after school, back here." I showed up. He put me in the back row. "Close your eyes." And he played Coltrane for me. My mind was blown. A destiny moment.

TNYCJR: And then you headed to Bennington College in Vermont.

SOKOLOV: When I discovered that Jimmy Garrison [Coltrane's bassist] taught at Bennington, I decided that's where I'd go. They had two music departments, classical music and Black music. At that time, Cecil (Taylor) had just closed his program at Antioch College. So, all these players who had "satellited" around Cecil's program just picked up and moved to Bennington to be in that fertile ground. Jimmy was no longer there once I landed, but Bill Dixon and Milford Graves were there, and they both had very powerful influences on me. Bill went on sabbatical and brought

up the saxophonist Jimmy Lyons, who took me under his wing. Milford, a brilliant free jazz drummer, was also very much into the physical, energetic effects of sound and rhythm on the human body. At one point when I was still studying opera, and I was in a studio with Milford, improvising wildly, freely, my opera coach heard it and walked in and said, "Sokolov, you choose me or him, this music or that music." I said, "I'm sorry, I choose this." Another destiny moment.

On one of the last days in college, Bill went around the room predicting the future of a group of students: "Oh, you're going to go into real estate, you're going to get married and have kids." But then he got to me, and said, "Hmmm, you? When you get to New York, call Sheila Jordan." Then I moved to Paris with our nine-piece free jazz/post P-Funk big band. When I came back to the U.S., I tried to remember who Bill told me to call. I heard in my head, "Call Jeanne Lee." I didn't know who she was, but I opened the phone book, called her up and said, "Bill Dixon told me to call." Turned out she lived three blocks north of me. We talked and sang together. As we were finishing, a woman came out of the kitchen and handed me a card and said, "Please come to rehearsal tomorrow." That was Patricia Nicholson, William Parker's wife.

That same night, I had a gig at the Merce Cunningham Studio. It was solo voice, solo choreographer night. I was in the dressing room waiting for my set to start when I heard the other singer and thought, "Who is that person? She's from my planet." The next morning, I went to the rehearsal for Patricia and William's piece, "A Thousand Cranes". Turned out it was me, the woman from Merce Cunningham, Ellen Christi and Jeanne Lee. Another destiny moment. We worked together for many years. Though Jeanne has passed—William, Patricia, Ellen and I still work together, so many decades later. Back in those days, the late '70s, there was also a scene of musicians that came East from California: Wayne Horvitz, Robin Holcomb, John Zorn, Dave Sewelson, Lesli Dalaba. They had a cooperative space called Studio Henry on Morton Street. That became a parallel community for me. Most of that extended community still play as well.

TNYCJR: Outside of those Bennington instructors, how did you get connected with Cecil Taylor?

SOKOLOV: When I was coming up, Cecil Taylor was all the buzz. There was a club called 55 Bar in New York (which permanently closed in 2022), a little dive bar that booked intriguing, state-of-the-art musicians. I was singing in Saint Petersburg, Russia, when I got a message from a club owner and she said, "This is Queva Lutz, I heard you sing. I've bought the 55 Bar. If you want it, you have a new home to sing in." So, I started singing there, and it turned out it was Cecil's

hangout. He would sit at the back of the bar. That was where he asked me to play with him in his big band. What a great ride on the tsunami of sound! He was a singular being and great fun to hang out with.

TNYCJR: You were greatly influenced by Betty Carter and your recording of "You Go to My Head" (*A Quiet Thing*, 2009) sounds like some channeling was going on.

SOKOLOV: I followed Betty as a young person. She had that something. Her fierceness, her connectedness,

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(INTERVIEW CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6)

her singular vision, her power, her independence and rejection of Columbia Records. She was one of the first people that made her own label and did things on her own terms. I used to go hear her at the Five Spot. Hearing her, hearing Roland Kirk, Miles Davis, Sarah Vaughan, Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix and Laura Nyro when I was in high school was formative.

TNYCJR: You started recording fairly late, compared to others.

SOKOLOV: I think the first recording that I put out as leader was *Angel Rodeo* in 1993. I have a shyness around putting myself forward.

TNYCJR: That is fascinating because on stage you're so free. I guess the stage and singing is the place where you are who you are.

SOKOLOV: Once I get on the stage, all is good, but the pre-performance stress can be intense. A friend of mine and I call each other before performance, the moment when we inevitably want to bail, to remind each other why we do this.

TNYCJR: You are going to be singing this month at Saint Peter's Church. What can listeners expect?

SOKOLOV: Yes, it's their "Sunday Jazz Vespers." It's a good fit, such a beautiful space and acoustic. I understand music as sacred practice and have studied the improvisational tradition of cantorial singing for some years now. I'll be doing some solo and duet work with Hans Young Binter, a wonderful young pianist. We will range through original works, cull from Duke Ellington's sacred concerts and some pieces by William Parker, along with some old wordless ancient melodies.

TNYCJR: To what do you attribute your longstanding relationship with William?

SOKOLOV: Another destiny moment. We're from the same planet. We understand music as a language of connection, of trusting something larger. William is a community builder. A lot of the material he writes for me is through-composed but it does not sound like that at all. His songs on the record *Stan's Hat Flapping In the Wind* with me and Cooper-Moore on piano are written out...how beautiful. From the 10-volume set *Migration of Silence Into and Out of the Tone World* (Centering, 2018-20), his album *Afternoon Poem*, for solo voice, was also fully scored for me. William is a beautiful being who writes beautiful, sacred music. I am thrilled and honored when his music lands on my piano.

TNYCJR: How much of your performance as a solo artist is improvised?

SOKOLOV: It's a combination—compositions, game structures—many pieces are structured improvisations. I understand scores as a map to a key that will open a door to a world. Knocking on the door, following the thread. The journey is never the same. Freedom within the form with intention.

TNYCJR: You have two children who have followed you in music.

SOKOLOV: They are both brilliant musicians in their own right. Music is one of our primary family languages. My son Jake Sokolov-Gonzalez is an experimental cellist and composer of abstract music. We have performed together for many years. My daughter Raina Sokolov-Gonzalez is a remarkable singer and composer of song. We all help each other on our projects. My next project

is a recording of my choral and chamber vocal pieces. We sing the chamber pieces together. One of the choral pieces was recorded with 24 voices. When the funding crashed for the second big piece, I was discouraged, and my son said, "No, mom—me, you and Raina can overdub the parts." So, the second big choral piece on the record is the three of us and two other singers layering all of the parts. Sometimes Raina and I sing on Jake's compositions. And Jake often produces and collaborates on Raina's projects. We help each other out. It's beautiful.

TNYCJR: As a music therapist and professor, how did what you call Embodied VoiceWork© develop?

SOKOLOV: Embodied VoiceWork© is about nonverbal singing as language and how to land into the body and into the scaffoldings of tone and time. When I was very young, I had powerful migraines, which were altering, painful and disorienting. Doctors gave me synthetic morphine. As I was entering middle school, I decided I'd figure out how to navigate it without drugs. I would go into a dark room and attend deeply to what was happening in my body, discerning what was primary pain and what was pain that came from fear. I started to work with myself through tracking sensation, using breath and sound to alleviate those episodes. It worked. That was the first application of using breath and voice and music in service of healing. And then in high school, I was called in to work with kids with struggles. One kid was severely developmentally delayed with no verbal language, one had suffered brain damage. Music was my language, so we used improvised music as language and movement to connect. No words. Those experiences were formative. When I went to the graduate music therapy program at NYU, I wrote about my radical work using improvised singing with all kinds of folks. At the oral defense of my thesis, I thought this work is way too out there for them. But they hired me to teach. I taught in the graduate music therapy program for ten years, and I got offered a full-time position at Tisch School of the Arts Experimental Theater Wing. I've been there for many decades now.

TNYCJR: What do you get from your teaching of others?

SOKOLOV: Teaching gives me the opportunity to develop, deepen and evolve a profound vocal connect and technique. The university classroom is a sanctuary where my fascination with the art of singing and the potentials of the human instrument and improvisation as language evolves. As an introvert I find my fascination lives in searching the physical, sensorial, relational and the larger tonal body of interval tone and time. My spot at NYU allows that to be my focus, rather than the music marketplace, which has always made me uncomfortable. When you get located in body tone time and space, beautiful things happen. When you open your ears, land into impulse and singing as a language of relationship—singing free solos, duets, quartets, octets, large group improvisations—deep communal connection arises. They say that in a chorus, its members' hearts go into sync. Really, music can be the answer to this crazy world.

For more info visit lisasokolov.com. Sokolov is at Saint Peter's Church Mar. 16. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Lisa Sokolov — *Angel Rodeo* (Laughing Horse, 1993)
- Lisa Sokolov — *Lazy Afternoon* (Laughing Horse, 1998)
- Gerry Hemingway — *Songs* (Between The Lines, 2001)
- Lisa Sokolov — *Presence* (Laughing Horse, 2002)
- Lisa Sokolov — *A Quiet Thing* (Laughing Horse, 2008)
- William Parker — *Stan's Hat Flapping in the Wind* (feat. Lisa Sokolov & Cooper-Moore) (Centering, 2015)



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