



SPEAKING IN TONGUES

Laurie Anderson's new movie *Home of the Brave* had just opened to mixed reviews and she was about to embark on a six week tour of Europe with *Natural History*. BARBARA LEHMANN met with her at her home in Lower Manhattan. It had been two weeks of interviews for her. Amidst the cacophony of the outside traffic, the phone calls and the doorbell they sat over coffee in the kitchen. There were few personal objects around: a Canon tpestar printer, an IBM typewriter and a ceramic violinist sporting a cowboy hat. Laurie Anderson broke the filters off of her Marlboro cigarettes and had this to say.

Barbara Lehmann: With the release of your film, you're reaching a wider audience. You've performed a kind of crossover dream from the New York Downtown Avantgarde into the Mainstream. Do you see yourself as a ground breaker for other performance artists?

Laurie Anderson: Yes. I hope that happens.

BL: Who are the artists that you are interested in?

LA: Well, when I'm in New York, I'm working around the clock. The rest of the time, I'm not here. One of the things I'm looking forward to, going on this tour, is being able to get some sense of what people are doing because I really don't know.


BL: Your movie has been compared to *The Talking Heads* film, *Stop Making Sense*, directed by Jonathan Demme. Is David Byrne someone you're interested in?

LA: I'm interested to see his next film. Because I thought *Stop Making Sense* was wonderful. It's kind of strange to compare the two films because the concerts themselves are very different.

BL: What kind of movies do you like?

LA: I liked Jim Jarmusch's *Stranger Than Paradise* very much. I just saw his new film. And I liked that. There are some really moody scenes in New Orleans that I liked. And I like Peter Greenaway's films. And Alan Rudolph's films.

BL: *Choose Me*. That was my favourite film last year.

LA: Umm hmm. Film is really perfect for what I'm doing now. Records 

PHOTOS / LES FINCHER



LAURIE ANDERSON



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have always been very frustrating. Because you're just doing the sound and I've really missed the pictures a lot. The next film I make definitely won't be a concert film. That was a way of trying some things out, and learning about film because all the films I've shown before have really been films from performances. It's ridiculous to call them films. They're not films. They're silent metronomes. They come right out of the camera and onto the screen. I never edit them. For example, the radar shot from *Home of the Brave*, or in animation. Something is going on around the film.

BL: Would you like to be an actress in films?

LA: No. I'm not interested in that. I'm interested in directing. The experience of making a film is something that I particularly like. I shot 'Home of the Brave' really for two reasons. One was to find out some things about making a film, and the second was to save that particular work. So I wouldn't ever have to perform it again. And in a certain way, I'm sorry that I didn't do that with *United States*. It becomes a very different work as soon as you shoot it on film. Obviously. It's something completely different.

BL: In your movie, you show us a new and different side of yourself. With your face projected larger than life, you become a pop icon, a kind of screen goddess. The 'Classic Laurie Anderson Clone', the androgynous punkette, changes from her man's suit to a satin jumpsuit into a silver lame gown.

LA: (sotto voce) That silver lame.

BL: That silver lame, you say! That was a new way of seeing you. Suddenly, you're not so androgenous anymore. In fact, you became a bit of a sexpot.

LA: Well, for me, it was another way of telling that story, which is the story of creation. And then that was sort of instigated by a woman. That was her story, hers and the snakes. The idea was to do a conversation between me and the snake and the woman. Which was the point of the snake gloves. But the dress took over more than the snake. It was kind of a battle.

BL: With the visual intimacy of the screen, there is no escaping that kind of femaleness.

LA: Well, the snake sort of sheds its skin at a certain point and it gets thrown away. That was the reason I did it. I really didn't think it would have such a sexual

impact, though a lot of people said, 'Oh, you wore a dress! What's going on?' I've always thought of myself as a neutral narrator. And in that case, I thought it was the narrator as well.

BL: Well, yes, it was. It had all that in it. But there is more to image on the screen than there might be in performance.

LA: It's true, at a distance you can get away with wearing a suit more.

BL: In a song, if you have a distanced persona, and you're talking about something that is very intimate, there is a cross current of energy that is transmitted. While on the screen . . .

LA: That's a very complicated thing you just said, starting with persona. Because I never understood that word at all. It was Bergman's worse side. There are a whole heap of performance art theories built on this idiotic word. Because I think people are afraid to say things more pop, like personality. But that's what they mean, I think.

BL: Maybe they're trying to be generous when they talk about persona instead of personality. Personality is your private sense of yourself, reserved for your friends. Persona would be your public personality.

LA: Personality reminds me too much of some of those be-bop songs from the 1950s. It's not what I would want to have alone at breakfast. I'd never want to have persona. I mean, I construct various voices, some of which slightly relate to myself as a person, but I've gone through a lot of trouble to, as I said, to act as a narrator, and constantly change voices. I mean, you'll hear the voice change five times within five songs and that's what I'm really trying to represent. Different ways of speaking. Rather than construct a coherent persona.

BL: And yet, you have effectively projected a very concise, clear, tight persona, the 'Laurie Anderson Clone'.

LA: I think ego in this country is very much about that. It's about Logo. It's about every gallery having its own special logo, or every magazine having its own individual stamp. It's so conservative. They forget what they're talking about, once they get their voice. So it's about, as far as I can see, sales. Because most of the people I know are much more complicated than the way you describe their personality in one sentence, in one image. They slip around all the

time. They use fifty voices a day, anyway. And it depends. You're just talking to them as a friend. But you should follow them around and see how they talk to somebody in a store when they buy something. You're seeing one little piece of them and you're calling that them. But it's your interaction with them that's making them. It always is so. And in a Performance Work, it's also that you're not interested in how a performer buys something in the store. You're interested in what he represents. So, yeah, you are focussing on that way of representing ideas. But I hope I'm steering away from that kind of possession. But, then, on the other hand, it would be a little odd to come from nowhere.

BL: Well, you have to come from yourself.

LA: And it just depends on how you're using yourself. The Japanese are capable of saying in all good faith, there is thinking going on. They don't have to say, I'm thinking. It's not a Cartesian situation. It's not bound to the ego the way the west is. And they think that this question of persona is so bound to the way that we perceive ego and the whole structure of the art world, that it really has become overblown. It hides the intent. Some of the press reaction to the movie in New York has been focussed, in a very negative way, on me as a performer. Which I'm used to, in a way, because some people treat performance as something like, I wander onto the set in the last five minutes and do something. They don't analyse it as something that I've structured. This is music, and these are images that I've put together, and that also I'm in. But what they concentrate on is whether it's sharp or flat, or what my hair looks like. Issues of sexism haven't really occurred to me for about 12 years.

BL: You're lucky.

LA: I'm very lucky.

BL: You bet.

LA: Because, also, I choose to let them go by. And I choose to be pompous enough and put out things like. Would you believe that I live by politics. I've spent a lot of time in the woman's move-



ment, pamphleting, you know things like that, and then I thought, hang on a minute. I'm going to do this in some other way. Because I'm not interested in lecturing people. I don't think that works anyway. I'm interested in building an intimate work in such a tight way that it's there without question. But with something like this film, when you're directing it as well as in it, the easiest way to talk about it is to look at the performer.

BL: Do you read a lot?

LA: I do a fair amount of reading.

BL: What do you like to read?

LA: Let's see. Technical manuals.

BL: Do you read those out loud?

LA: Yeah. Always. Let's see, what else am I reading? Anything in French, mostly.

BL: The French theorists?

LA: No. I'm getting ready to do these concerts in other languages, so I'm reading through my collection of books trying to remember what the language sounds like. Let's see. What else. I got this book that I read about a few days ago in the Times. It's a book of statistics about

And many of the social services we as Americans think, oh yeah, we're a country that loves the kids, and we give everyone a chance. But then you look at these statistics and you think, we're really at the bottom of the line on everything like daycare, pregnancy leaves, any opportunities for women. And certainly blacks are a whole other issue. I mean, the whole thing goes so far back. That's one of the reasons I find myself angry at this book. It looks like nothing happened. It looks like it was destructive instead of constructive. You look at this and it just breaks your heart. You just go, I'm living in this complete dream world. This country is something quite different than it says it is. Quite different.

BL: This is a subject you get very passionate about. I keep coming back to the images in your work. It really strikes me how, when you come out dressed in a suit and tie with your really feminine voice that gets synthesized into a lower, masculinesque voice, it incites just by the duality. You are a woman who can bear the trappings of a man. You can play

is definitely paying the bill, and the waiter is a professional waiter. Here, the woman, particularly in New York, may just as easily be paying the bill. The waiter is writing a novel and will sit down and tell you about it. It's much more fluid. People are trying to separate their roles as they move, which is a more exciting way of living. But it also unhooks you from your culture, not that we have much of one anyway. But you're more of a free agent. Which is frightening.

BL: What was your experience of this in Japan?

LA: One of the most chilling things I saw in Japan was a cemetery where people who work in the same company are all buried together, instead of being buried with their families. I can't really analyse that country. I haven't spent enough time there.

BL: They have a very sexist society. I mean, there are not so many women out on the street.

LA: That part of it drives me crazy. You see the woman ten feet behind the man. I'm not treated that way, because

'LOOK, I'M NOT FROM THE STATE DEPARTMENT'



social issues in this country. Feminists are very down on this book because it's kind of gloomy. One of the statistics is what women make as salaries, which in 1939 was 63¢ to the dollar, and in 1984 is 64¢. I figured out that at this rate, it would be the year 3624 when we achieve parity. I don't know about you, but that's an awful long time to wait. Which means that it's going to be even later before we achieve other kinds of parity, really being able to hold an equal footing. The other very, very shocking things in this book were things like 89.5% of the people who live in this country at the poverty level, or below, are women and children.

both sex roles. And well.

LA: I think the distance between men and women is less in the United States than, for example, in Europe where there is still a history of romanticism in women. I think women here are not as . . . well, it's a cultural thing, too. There's not as big a space between men and women because our roles in general aren't as defined. For example, the situation of a man, a woman and a waiter in France is very different than the situation of a man, a woman and a waiter in the United States. People are more into their official roles in Europe. The woman is (LA MAKES A GESTURE), and the man

I'm a guest. One of the ideas of the Japanese promoters was to go to Bali for a couple of days and talk to the Prince of Bali. That was very strange. That made the Japanese seem enlightened in terms of women. We stayed at the palace, and again, I was treated as a guest. But the other women in the party were . . . well, we each had our own house. If a man left his clothes on the floor and his house a mess, it was all cleaned up and his clothes were laundered and put back in the drawers. But it wasn't the case for the women. They had to clean up their own place.

BL: When you are received as a guest around the world, do you find yourself in

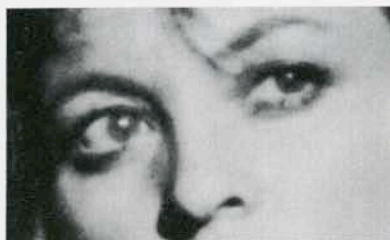


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the position of Ambassadrette?

LA: Ambassadrette. In the situation right now, which is politically, ridiculously hot. You go to places where you're really hated. Period. And I start to talk, 'Look, I'm not from the State Department. So let's talk about something either one-to-one, or let's talk about music' Inevitably I'm drawn to that because that's what I'm most interested in. Particularly with the element of terrorism, which I think of really as a serious deflection. I think that it conveniently prevents people from talking about the real problems. Not that terrorism isn't a nightmare. But it means that you can't stand up in this country and say to the people who are in power, I'm afraid that the entire world is going to blow up. There's no kind of security here. What kind of happiness is this? That sort of Rally-Round-The-Flag-Boys mentality here, and Cowboy Machismo is a kind of

infantile reaction to terrorism. A way of saying, Hey, man, we can do something about this. We can get that guy. The way he got us. Let's have these little squabbles. Not to underestimate the fact that people are getting killed for these little squabbles. But if effectively, very effectively prevents people from looking at this other, much more frightening issue of nuclear holocaust.



BL: On the Monday night when Reagan bombed Libya, I was out having an intimate drink with a friend and then I went back to a friend's loft where the

television was on and I discovered what had just happened while I was out there innocently carrying on with my life. There was Reagan saying, 'And I'd do it again if I had to.' It was terrifying. I felt so powerless, helpless. How does he get to broadcast a statement like that?

LA: He gets it from the movies. And it gives people a sense of achievement. Our little wars, here and there, that make people stand up and cheer, are obscene. As if we were taking on someone our size. You know, it's pathetic. And the worst thing is, that it takes people's minds off the things we should be paying attention to. Which is that we are serious and dangerous aggressors in a very serious, a very hot global situation. Not one that's just a squabble with Libya. That's just a part of it. It's on the level of a four year old making things worse. I find it intensely disgusting. And when I go to other countries, I am constantly asked about it. Because they're going, What are you doing?

BL: So how does that affect you

ISSUES OF SEXISM HAVEN'T REALLY OCCURRED TO ME FOR ABOUT TWELVE YEARS



when you travel?

LA: I can't remain noncommittal to something like that. I think that, even though I am not there as a member of the State Department, I'm there as a citizen of this country that I have opinions about and I'm happy to air them. It's no joke that Reagan is a crook. Let's say that it's no secret that the guy is an extremely violent man, out of control.

BL: Ronbo. Have you heard that bastardization?

LA: To me, Ronbo is about as real as Dumbo, or Bambi. What I'd actually like to see is a film that's Rocky vs. Rambo. Kind of a split screen kind of thing. Like Pillow Talk. Rambo comes back from Nam and he's really being obnoxious, just bragging about it. He challenges Rocky to a fight, the Italian Stallion. He thinks Rocky is such a sissy, all he does is fight in rings. Not in the jungle. So the two of them take each other on. That's as far as I've gotten with the script.

BL: Let me take you back to your work.

LA: Right now I'm ready to do another project. Touring is gruelling. At the moment, I'm sure that the next work I do will be much more interior.

BL: Do you do any training for your performances, anything to keep you in shape?

LA: I started working with a woman who is very interesting. A voice therapist actually. The voice is, of course, very connected to many different things. Your sense of yourself, as well as all the physical tubes that are running through



you. So trying to locate that means trying to be as free as you can.

BL: I saw you last night at Franklin Furnace's Artie Awards. They presented

you with an Artie for *United States*. You said you were happy to be reminded that there's still a New York Art World.

LA: I enjoyed seeing the short films, but I really don't like all the social part. I love to do the work, but I don't really like the things that surround it, all this yammering around about the stuff, you know. But I enjoyed Vito Acconci's speech.

BL: Yes. I did too.

LA: but those endless thank yous.

BL: I liked it when Acconci thanked the late 60s/early 70s for his award.

LA: Ummm hmmm.

BL: Thanking the time instead of a person.

LA: I think it's difficult to spread your name and your picture around time without losing something. And I think you pay a price for that exposure. I've found that, personally, I've become very guarded.

And I don't want that to happen in my work. Because you have to feel free to do anything ●

I'D NEVER
WANT TO
HAVE 'PERSONA'