

Jeanne Lee, art on the move

The expressive urgency of the first sound by Diana Torti

“No words/only a feeling, no questions/only a light, no sequence/only a being, no journey/only a dance”.

These are the opening lines of “*Conspiracy*”, album published by Jeanne Lee for the Earthforms Records in 1974. These lyrics, that were written by David Hazelton, poet of the Jazz Poetry and first husband of the Afro-American singer, well convey through words what music represents throughout sounds, images and colours. Despite the forty-seven years just passed from the publishing (which unfortunately has not yet been followed by a well-deserved reprint), the suggestions of the songs proposed by the Lee evoke emotions and sound stimuli that still amaze and enchant, giving musical proposals now more than ever: precious material to revisit and deepen.

In 1974 Jeanne Lee was thirty-five (she was born in New York on January 29th, 1939). From the earliest experiences, Lee shows a strongly innovative direction over the traditional image of the jazz singer. Starting from her first album, where the traditional way of singing the jazz standards and the jazz pronunciation are completely reconsidered, her vocal research will continue intensifying the relationship between lyrics and improvisation, in a continuous exploration of the possibilities of decomposing and reconstructing words or fragments of them, of their repeating, of vocalizations not necessarily related to spoken language.

“*The Newest Sound Around*” (RCA Victor, 1961), represents the debut for both her and Ran Blake, her colleague of studies at Bard College in New York (they met each other on September 1956). Jeanne immediately imposed herself with her warm and suggestive voice, made of unexpected variations of sound and phrasing, fresh and courageous in interpretation. Blake is an essential and sober pianist, that involves and includes influences from both contemporary and traditional jazz styles, and that has an extraordinary awareness of harmony and sense of rhythm.

The duo is unconventional and introduce a new aesthetic in performing jazz standards. The repertoire is revised in almost completely improvised style, and is presented by offering a vision that goes far beyond the boundaries bounded by the tradition of the voice duo and the aesthetic canons of the individual disciplines. The repertoire is made of jazz standards (including a *Straight Ahead* version, which affirms the strong connection between Jeanne Lee and Abbey Lincoln, a spatial and rarefied arrangement of *Where Flamingos Fly* and an impressive interpretation of *Laura*), and also songs from several music traditions.

Press and audience are speechless. In the first review in 1962, for the prestigious *Down Beat*, the voice of Jeanne Lee is considered too wide and the way of playing of Blake too eclectic: insiders think that there is too much experimentation that exceeds the accepted limit in the musical search in that field. The two musicians, consistent with their interpretive and executive needs, have simply begun to explore the endless possibilities of their individual instruments and the combination of them, pursuing an original and innovative direction.

Travel to Europe

In 1963 they will do an unexpected and rewarding tour in Europe that will satisfy their determination in proposing their identity. They will play in Germany, Norway, Denmark, Holland, Great Britain and in May also in Italy. European press will reconsider the little enthusiastic attention so far directed to the duo, they will include with interest the new musical research and they will also agree in considering this young singer as a precious rarity, totally projected in the complete disintegration of the boundaries between the human voice and a wind instrument that improvise, without losing the fusion with the lyrics.

Over the years to come, she will participate in various recordings on behalf of distinguished colleagues with whom he worked steadily: “*Blasè*” by Archie Shepp (BYG/Actuel, 1969), “*The 8th Of July*” by Gunter Hampel (Birth, 1969), “*In Sommerhausen*” (Calig, 1969) by Marion Brown, “*Escalator Over The Hill*” by Carla Bley (JCOA/ Ec, 1971), “*Town Hall 1972*” by Anthony Braxton (HatArt, 1972), just to name a few (the full discography of her career includes seventy-seven recordings).

“*Conspiracy*” is a central point in Jeanne Lee’s artistic life. This is her first solo album where she is both a composer and a performer, well aware of the fact that the audience could finally hear her in all her aspects. And more than ever, her artistic life was strongly connected with her private life. Her artistic and cultural formation led her to confront dance, choreography, music, psychology and literature, thanks also to a family context that had allowed her to grow in an environment sensitive to art and the free Self-expression.

Her mother Madeline worked in a government job, one of the first Black American women of her time to do so and she has been socially active in the community where she lived with her family. Her father S.Alonzo Lee was singer, specialized in classic music, Spirituals and Church music. Jeanne Lee has grown up with an approach of openness and curiosity to any stimulus that could add value to her experiences. A research that, presumably, was her foremost a human need, as emerges from the words of her daughter Cavana Hazelton in an interview that she generously released to me in January 2013: “I can only guess what her message was: authentic expression. (...) She was interested in expressing things which she felt or that needed representation, whether this was through children’s schoolyard rhymes or political views or the human experience”.

Expressive truth

This aspect of Lee’s personality allows contextualization of the exploratory work of the singer, oriented towards the search for an increasingly authentic expression truth, without the limiting chains of forms of communication built. The Sixties, which have been the cradle of avant-garde both of African American and European matrix, are the period of the debut of Jeanne Lee. The history in which the woman lives, becomes an opportunity for her: the languages and the proposals that pass through the culture of those years become her tools for conveying her expressive urgency in a spontaneous, balanced and coherent manner. What better way to do it than the music, lived as an expression related to everything, beyond a place or even of the time itself.

Strongly rooted in its own culture of origin, Lee’s family descends from Seminole, one of the numerous tribal groups of Native Americans of North America and of the Southeastern cultural

area, with a sense of belonging and a rather distinctive community. The story of every people has something to offer to the history of the whole world, we are all connected to each other.

According to the aesthetic view of Seminole, the cultural heritage and oral traditions of Native Americans and Afro-Americans formed much of the learning process. Jeanne Lee often used tales, dance movements or songs drawing on this heritage to convey knowledge or values.

Lee claims the collective as a need for realization, through which to produce art and culture. It should not be forgotten that she lived in a historical period in which African Americans have embarked on a strong acceleration in the process of struggle for the recognition of their rights. Such an urgency has often been embodied in various aggregating forms, which have added a concrete meaning to the collective sense of a community of individuals. This aspect has always been a strong need for the singer's life, which has often lived and realized this dimension both in the private and artistic sphere (for instance adhering to the Carla Bley Jazz Composer Orchestra), and has led to the development of a coherent and significant political and civil commitment over time.

Her connection with Europe has been another important aspect in her life, also thanks to the precious artistic collaboration with her second husband, the German polystrumentist Gunter Hampel, who she met in 1967. The bond is perfect. From the end of the 1960s the artistic relationship between the two will bring them to realize various projects and numerous recordings. Europe, at the time receptive to the most varied forms of experimentation, welcomes them with interest. They went also to Italy at the Jazz Festival in Pisa, in 1978. A stage that gives a rich image of meanings, wrapped in an atmosphere that is both fascinating and contrasting for that time: the black and white couple play in the wake of the slow, but already started, process of fusion between African American free jazz and European avant-garde music. At the end of the Sixties, it was not so easy to see collaborations between free jazz musicians with European avant-garde ones. The fusion between the two musical worlds has been a slower adaptation and development process than we might think.

Thanks to her unique and original way of singing, between the two cultural traditions, in 1976 John Cage invites her to participate in the performance of his *Apartment House 1776* (written for 24 musicians and 4 voices) commissioned in the American Bicentennial Year for the National Endowment for the Arts. The work was directed by Pierre Boulez at the first performance.

Jeanne Lee, both poetess and singer, through voice becomes a researcher and example to build a new road that does not cancel, indeed, understands and goes beyond the reality in which she is immersed. And she does it with certainty: she is not afraid of her own sound.

The courage expressed in sound search and this coherence of identity make her vocal gesture rich in meaning. And so the word recognizable as such becomes another thing: possibility of enunciation, fragmentation, decomposition, vocalization, syllable, vocal or consonant, everything becomes music and takes on a new expressive meaning. The word is melted with music. An example of this is her interpretation of *In These Last Days*, a poem that she composed and magically interpreted in the album "*Nuba*" (1979) (Black Saint Records), released on behalf of drummer Andrew Cyrille and with Jimmy Lions on alto sax (the album has recently been reissued by Cam Records). The song can be seen as a kind of New York singer's manifesto, representing her commitment as a musician to social change.

Who knows if Jeanne Lee had figured out the possibility of language only as pure sound, irrespective of the articulated language. Certainly, poetry and text for her were a starting point for improvisation, suggesting possibilities so far unexplored in voice improvisations. And even in this regard, Jeanne Lee has always kept a lyrical and harmonious character, respecting melodic fluency and sound elegance that coexisted even in the most extreme search context, such as the "free jazz".

To complete this brief summary of the artistic and human path of a singer who still has much to offer through what she has left, I rely on the reflections of David Linx, an extraordinary singer and artist who has been fortunate enough to meet her and who has kindly shared with me the emotions of his memory.

David Linx met Jeanne Lee when he was a very young child. His father Elias Gistelinck, a trumpeter and a contemporary composer, had collaborated as a producer of Jeanne Lee and Ran Blake and as a founder of the Middelheim Jazz Festival was in close contact with Gunter Hampel. "I remember I was playing in Denmark, Copenhagen, at the festival, as a drummer (...) on the 1983. She was in Copenhagen with the vocal summit (...). I remember how sweet she was, just a sweet person. And then in the hotel I went to her room, we had a room in the same hotel, she didn't know. So I knocked on her door, and she opened the door, and she saw me and she started crying. I think she recognized me immediately or something. So she started crying. Very moving. She was a wonderful and sweet person. And then I talked to her once more, I think it was a week before she died. (...) But I think that she basically announced me that she was dying, but not with those words, I felt her (...) so, was amazing the connection!

Afro-American women you know, have something, and I think she was completely humane, not only human but humane person, no envy, no jealousy you know (...) For me she's all much part of my life".

Extraordinary in improvisation research, brave in rhythmic acrobatics and timbre-chromatic explorations, passionate poetess, unique in her interpretive research through which she added meaning to every phoneme pronounced. It is hard to imagine her sound features separated by her sensitivity: the true expression of the self immersed in a total dimension, from which her voice could not be excluded. All this made her sincerely human and therefore authentically beautiful.

We should revisit her story, hoping to see the reissue of some of the albums where she has collaborated: the beauty of sharing will be enriched with further treasures.