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Conversation with Deanna Witkowski

by Danilo Navas

"At the moment I feel like I'm at a crossroads in figuring out what instrumentation I want to write for. I want to do more with writing with extended forms, writing for more horns, but also have more room for improvisation. At the same time, at some point I want to do a record of my vocal/soprano arrangements of standard tunes... I have a whole book of that, and I love arranging."

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Tell us about your beginnings in music. How did it all start?

My kindergarten teacher played piano- there was a piano in our classroom. I remember sitting around singing songs in class... and I must have shown some musical potential, because my teacher told my mom that I should take piano lessons. Since we couldn't afford lessons, at first I learned from some of my mom's old piano books- and I played on our two and a half octave electric organ (one of those organs that makes a huge whirring noise when you turn it on, has not-quite-full-sized-keys, and has black buttons for minor chords and white ones for major chords!). By the time I started taking lessons in fourth grade, we had moved to rural western Pennsylvania, and had a neighbor with a piano- so I practiced next door until we bought a \$50 old concert upright, which is what I practiced on all the way through high school. And I should mention that the way that my mom paid for a year of lessons was by bartering: she's a great visual artist, and she did a series of four paintings of my piano teacher's house in exchange for a year's worth of lessons.

I also played flute from fourth grade on, and am just beginning to get back to the instrument now. I want to stay connected to music through breath, and playing flute helps me to do that, and to remember to breathe with whatever I'm playing on piano as well.

You were trained as a classical pianist and flutist. What made you choose piano as your instrument?

I honestly don't remember there being a choice with piano- I just wanted to play. And with flute, I really wanted to play clarinet, but in one of those strange moves of a music teacher telling the parent or child something like "your overbite means that you'll have a hard time playing clarinet," I went with flute. I did end up taking alto and tenor sax lessons in college- I loved playing flute, but I've always liked reed instruments. I love double reeds as well- especially English horn.

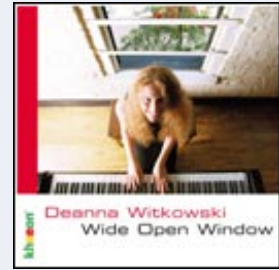
I was reading in your bio that after a four month sojourn teaching piano in Kenya in 1996, you returned to Chicago and received a city grant to record a demo of original latin jazz. Why Latin Jazz? Tell us about your encounter with Latin Music?

I came to Latin jazz mainly through playing more straight salsa- I played in one salsa band in Chicago for about two years, and that happened in a rather interesting way: In 1993 I attended DePaul University in Chicago for graduate studies in jazz. One day while I was sitting in a practice room playing, a man laden with sheet music came and knocked on the door. He said that he had a new salsa/merengue band, and was looking for a keyboard player. He asked if I could read through some of the charts. I really didn't know much about any Latin music at the time, but I was game for anything, so I said I'd make a rehearsal. I ended up loving the salsa tunes, and the bass player xeroxed some material from one of Rebeca Mauleon's books for me to check out. He also taught me about clave, and I learned more in 1996 when I went to an Afro-Cuban workshop at the Banff Centre for the Arts in Alberta. I was able to study there with Chucho Valdés, and got to play with some of the guys from Irakere. It was after I came back from that trip that I applied for and received a grant to write and record some original Latin jazz. I already had my own quintet in Chicago, and had been writing more straight-ahead and ECM-ish stuff for that group; now I wanted to try to take what I had learned and focus on writing in the Latin jazz genre. The demo that I recorded became the beginning of my first recording, "Having to Ask".

I should also mention that I really came to Latin jazz from the jazz end of the spectrum, since I really came to the salsa band straight from a jazz and classical background. I've always been interested in studying other cultures and essentially just being a sponge for whatever I can soak in. Some of the pianists whose work I truly admire bring so many influences to their playing that they end up having their own unique sound... guys like Danilo Pérez, Ed Simon, Luis Perdomo, Alon Yavnai.

To what extent have you been "influenced" by Chucho Valdés and Hilario Durán in your playing?

The time I spent with Chucho at Banff was really about internalizing basic grooves. With Hilario, I was impressed with the consistent musicality of his playing no matter what he'd be doing- whether he's playing a killer tumbao or playing a florid danzón. Hilario let me have one of his charts on his danzón, "Esto si tiene que ver," from his recording Francisco's Song. I loved that tune so much, and Hilario was so generous to let me have the chart- so I went home and wrote a danzón for him, which is on my first record.



Deanna Witkowski
WIDE OPEN WINDOW

Khaeon World Music
USA - 2003

1. **ALL THROUGH THE NIGHT**
2. **NEW AUGUST TUNE**
3. **WIDE OPEN WINDOW**
4. **FROM THIS MOMENT ON**
5. **A RARE APPEARANCE**
6. **SPEAK MY NAME**
7. **JUST ONE OF THOSE THINGS**
8. **YOU AND THE NIGHT AND THE MUSIC**
9. **A WONDERFUL GUY**
10. **SANCTUS**



DEANNA WITKOWSKI: piano,
vocals
DONNY MC CASLIN: tenor and
soprano saxes
JONATHAN PAUL: bass
TOM HIPSKIND: drums



I hope that I have occasion to spend more time both with Chucho and Hilario. My time with each of them was pretty condensed, so I'd love to be able to have a more extended block of time just to be around them and to hear them play!

You also mention Mary Lou Williams as one of your main influences. What can you tell us about it?

Mary Lou isn't one of my main influences in terms of actual playing- she's more someone I admire for her sheer scope of influence and versatility. Also for her adventurous spirit. I didn't even know anything about Mary Lou's playing or composing until I was asked to play on the MLW Women in Jazz Festival at the Kennedy Center in 2000. I figured that playing on the fest would give me a great opportunity to check out some of her recordings, and to find out more about her. I went and bought a bunch of records, read a biography on her (*Morning Glory* by Linda Dahl), and wrote "Wide Open Window" as a tribute to her, which we played at the festival.

I was also impressed by Mary Lou's throwing herself fully into whatever she did. When she converted to Catholicism, she began writing liturgical music- wrote a couple of masses, had one of them performed at St. Patrick's here in New York. For a couple of years I worked as a music director at a church, and composed a lot of service music. So I feel like I have this kinship with Mary Lou. In fact, when I taped in March for an upcoming edition of Marian McPartland's Piano Jazz, I played "Wide Open Window," and Marian told me that I had elements of Mary Lou in me. That was a great honor. I'm also about to begin a project of researching some of Mary Lou's sacred music, and will be talking about my findings at a jazz/church conference this fall.

On "Wide Open Window" you play on a trio and quartet formats. They suit perfectly well your musical ideas and your compositions. How do you feel about this?

I often write for my voice and soprano or tenor sax, so that means that much of my material is quartet stuff versus trio. But I love the openness of a trio as well. We did the trio sessions a year earlier than the quartet sessions- I used my New York saxophonist, Donny McCaslin, and my Chicago rhythm section, Jon Paul on bass and Tom Hipskind on drums. I'm excited to be going back to Chicago in about a week to do a bunch of trio dates with Jon and Tom. We haven't played together in a year and a half! It's going to be such a fun reunion.

At the moment I feel like I'm at a crossroads in figuring out what instrumentation I want to write for. I want to do more with writing with extended forms, writing for more horns, but also have more room for improvisation. At the same time, at some point I want to do a record of my vocal/soprano arrangements of standard tunes... I have a whole book of that, and I love arranging.

Do you think that moving from Chicago to New York has been a very important step towards achieving your goals as an artist?

I know that the answer to this question is yes, though I feel like it's hard for me to answer this with much perspective when I'm constantly scrambling just to survive! I came here wanting to be around great musicians, to be a sponge... and I continue to do that. I was able to study Brazilian music for two years with drummer Vanderlei Pereira, and in addition to me forming my quartet here, those studies have been one of the best things I feel that I've done here. I really want to be playing Brazilian music more.

I also moved here with a full-time church music director gig, and while that took much energy and time, it also allowed me the space to compose. I miss having a consistent venue to try new music in.

Right now I am trying to figure out how to be able to spend enough time playing/composing without having to constantly feel that I need to be looking for work. I've

spent a lot of energy here just being a business person, and am hoping that sometime soon I'll have someone else who can at least handle some of the booking end of things for me.

Let's talk about the songs from your new CD...

Five of the tunes are originals- one of them is from a jazz mass; the other five are arrangements of jazz standards, and three of those are Cole Porter tunes. I've always felt that if you're going to record a standard, you have to do it in a totally refreshing way that makes the tune new for you as well as for the listener. I think that each of these arrangements do that: i.e., "From This Moment On" is done as a straight-eighth ballad with soprano sax on the melody, and wordless vocal doing a line underneath. "A Wonderful Guy" is turned into a samba; "You and the Night and the Music" takes the beginning of a Chopin étude in E flat minor- a very dark key to me- and leaves the chromatic left hand portion of the original intact while putting the melody from "You and the Night" on top, then reharmonizes the bridge while still trying to keep the feel of the Chopin throughout. I want the tune to feel unified, not like "here's the classical portion, here's the jazz." I think it does come off as being its own thing.

The originals have different feels: there's a baiiao, a cha-cha that's mainly in seven; the title tune has a bluesy melody in three over some sinuous chord changes.

Is there a special meaning on the title of your new CD?

Again, that tune is a tribute to Mary Lou Williams- and what I wanted to reflect in that tune was Mary Lou's ability to go to so many different places with her music, yet still remain grounded. For Mary Lou, her roots were in blues and boogie-woogie. That's why "Wide Open Window" has a bluesy melody, but the chord progression and the fact that the tune is in three allows us to extend our improvisations both rhythmically and harmonically.

I thought that "Wide Open Window" would also be a great title for the record, since it shows many different influences on my playing and writing. It's not that I came to the project saying, "let's see, I want a samba, a cha-cha, an uptempo swing tune;" it's just that this project is a snapshot of where I was at when I went in the studio, as all recordings are. I try to remember that music is a wide open window- I will always be a student, always learning, always growing. That is what I love about being a musician.

Jazz and spiritualism seem to go hand on hand in your music. How do you reconcile both worlds?

I don't really see being a Christian and being a jazz musician as two different worlds that I have to reconcile. I think that everything that I do is to be done in service to God, and that having the privilege of playing music is a gift. I've truly enjoyed being able to play in churches where I'm able to present some of my sacred music, most of which happens to be jazz... I think that church is supposed to be where people who profess to be following Christ are supposed to learn, grow, not stay in one place... I've found that often when I bring new sounds into a church environment, it allows listeners to experience God in a new way. That's the most I can hope for in any musical situation, no matter where it's taking place.

Your recent accomplishments include winning the 2002 edition of the Great American Jazz Piano Competition. What can you tell us about that experience?

This was the third time that I was a finalist in the competition, the prior years having been in 1997 and 2000. What happens is that pianists from all over the world submit recordings to be considered for the competition, and five of them get selected. I had already decided before going to Jacksonville (where the competition takes place) that this was the last year I was going to enter, no matter what the results were. I felt totally calm, not nervous... it was great! The piece that I think really resonated with people

was the solo version of "You and the Night and the Music." I felt the energy of the room, the piece, everything... it was pretty amazing. It felt like the audience was breathing with me.

Each of us also got to play two trio tunes with Jay Leonhart and Danny Gottlieb. Both of them have always been very supportive of me, and they play the competition every year. The night after winning, I did an opening trio set with Jay and Danny before John Scofield's group came on.

Is there something else you would like to add? new projects, coming gigs...?

My next immediate project is to get all of my sacred jazz into the computer in formats that church musicians can use. I've been receiving many requests for sheet music from church music directors around the country. I hope to have everything up on my website by the fall. I also am excited that some of this music is about to be published in a new jazz hymnal that will be available next month.

I don't have any definite recording plans in the works as of yet, but I do want to record a project of much of my sacred music. I also am considering writing a suite based on some writings by St. Teresa of Avila. The imagery in one of her works on prayer uses the depiction of a castle with many rooms, all of them being different stages of prayer; and the room where the soul reaches union with God is in the center. Her imagery gives me different ideas for structure, and right now I'm trying to just really understand more of Teresa's writing so that I have a better sense of form and instrumentation.

I also have some nice gigs coming up in the late summer/fall: in August, I'm doing a week-long residency as part of an arts conference at Gutenberg College in Eugene, Oregon; I'm also playing a few gigs in the Portland area while I'm there. In September, my quartet is playing a jazz festival upstate, on Lake George; in October, I'm speaking on some of Mary Lou Williams' sacred music at a conference called "Jazz and the Church," in November, my quartet is playing at my alma mater, Wheaton College, outside of Chicago; and next January I'm doing a couple of Concerts at the Tel Aviv Opera House. I'm constantly working on finding places to play, so I expect there to be more good things to come!

To know more about Deanna Witkowski, visit her website: www.deannawitkowski.com

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