

The French Connection: Lua Hadar



Written by Maxwell Chandler

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Lua Hadar

Lua Hadar is a vocalist, actress, comedienne and cabaret artist who heads the ensemble TWIST, based in the Bay Area. Hers is "jazz without borders," spiced with elements of Latin, pop, funk, and international cabaret. Maxwell Chandler interviewed Lua for Jazz Police.

Maxwell Chandler: You come from a musical family, your father being a saxophonist. What was the music you heard growing up and how did it influence you?

Lua Hadar: My father played both classical music and what at the time was popular music, the Great American Songbook. He played in bandstands, he played casually, and he played at Roseland Dance Hall in New York. He also played symphonic music. Around the house he really only played symphonic music and some opera. We heard classical music at home but when I sang with him at the piano we would sing popular songs. I had a great deal of classical influence as a foundation.

Every summer I would see my father play in these big hotels like Brown's and Grossinger's. It was the "Borscht Belt", that's what they called the Catskills. Once or twice a summer we would get to dress up and go see him perform and see the stage show. I would see him in these bands and I would see all the singers and the comedians. Afterwards the Latin bands would play, I would see people start to come onto the dance floor and I would love the Latin rhythms. I think all of that had a great influence on me.

MC: Had you always known you wanted to be a singer and when did you start singing professionally?

LH: When I was tiny I said I wanted to be an actress when I grew up but I always sang as well. I think those two things were always linked for me

MC: You graduated *summa cum laude* with a B.A in Theater Performance. Had you at this point seen a connection between singing and theater?

LH: I went to college at Albany State University in New York. I have a degree in theater from there. But even during that period I performed *The Fantastics* and I performed in a number of musical things. Actually I did a French music concert in the context of my French minor at school as well. I graduated from college when I was 21 and then went to acting school for about a year. Then I went out into the New York audition circuit with my picture and my resume. So I would say probably from the age of 22 or 23 I started getting little gigs off Broadway, sometimes way, way off Broadway; it was music and theater.

MC: You continued your studies at the Neighborhood Playhouse School of the Theatre and The Dalcroze School of Music, also studying with Metropolitan Opera coach, Joan Dornemann. Where you actively touring and performing outside of school by this point?

LH: After college I sang in an off-Broadway show and somebody told me I should study. I was put in touch with a teacher who eventually put me in touch with a coach, Joan Dornemann at the Metropolitan Opera. When I met her, she chose her words very carefully and said to me, "You have the kind of voice and the kind of sound and tone color and the big voice and the small body and you can act; it seems that you could do opera." She was very, very careful but then she took me under her wing. She set me up with people and coaches and for seven years I studied opera.

They wouldn't let me sing out professionally while I was studying because they didn't want me to sing any of my potential repertoires. They didn't know what type of a vocal type I was going to be because the voice starts to change in your late twenties (at the time I was in my mid twenties) and we didn't know if I was going to be a lyric soprano, a dramatic soprano or a mezzo soprano. So they wouldn't let me sing anything that a woman would sing. They only let me sing tenor arias.

MC: Sometimes life within the universities/ schools can be a little insulated, creating a sort of disconnect between expectations and realities of what it will be like on the outside for a working artist. Did you experience any type of reality shock upon leaving your studies?

LH: Absolutely! The University, with all the theater history and theater practicum, provided a sort of high-minded view of what theater could be like and was like in the real world. I graduated college wanting to be a reparatory actress and then I got out into the real world in New York and started auditioning. You are given half a minute to sing eight bars and you have to come in looking like the thing they were casting for or else you didn't even get to sing your eight bars. That was a great surprise to me. Really, each one of us, we are all small business owners and we are our own business. No one taught us how to publicize ourselves or how to run a small business.

I think that things have changed now in the schools, like at UCLA where they are teaching the business of entertainment. We really need to learn how to put ourselves out there. Half a lifetime later I'm beginning to learn now.



Lua Hadar©Mikhail Rezhepp

some steps to the International Children's Theater circuit that I had been involved with during my college days and was able to hook up a residency with a theater there. I worked there for 5 years.

MC: Ethnomusicologist Robert Brown created the term "World Music" which has sort of morphed into a blanket term for "exotic" (and made safe akin to some animal at a zoo) music for yuppies to listen to while on their laptops in Starbucks. David Byrne famously wrote an essay "I Hate World Music" (Oct. 1999 NY Times) which was against such a term. You refer to your music as "Music without borders." What is your conceptualization of this?

LH: My objective in singing an eclectic song list is that the audience gets to experience a feeling of unity. I think I fall in the middle between the purist definition of world music and the corrupted definition of world music. I want people to understand and get the music. I want people to feel like they can cozy up to whatever other cultures I present on stage, so that it doesn't feel alien, so that they can feel one with the other people in the audience, listening to the concert. I feel like world music has a very altruistic objective of helping to create world harmony.

MC: Your band "Twist" differs from the usual line-up one expects behind a singer. How did you come by the selection of instrumentation?

LH: We started out with a trio and I started to want to hear more in the band. Late in 2007 I began to add in the reed player; that was what my ears were hearing.

I have a nice friendship with Frank Jackson, Bay Area/national legend, and I was talking with him about it at the time. We were beginning to do more Latin tunes then, so I asked him, "What do I need to put in the band?" So we had a nice conversation and I said I thought I would like to add Latin percussion to the band and he said "Yes! Yes! Latin percussion." So the next time we did a series of concerts I added in a Latin player...that was also towards the end of 2007. Then when we were planning the CD and we were doing a few French songs, we knew we really had to have an accordion there to speak to the French color. So we added in the accordion in 2008.

MC: Is this your first time as bandleader? Do you find a difference between singing with a band and singing with an ensemble of which you are the leader?

LH: Yes. I really had to learn how to be a bandleader and I don't even quite consider myself a bandleader. I kind of share that role with Jason Martineau, the band's Music Director; but he has really taught me a tremendous amount. I started working with him in 2005 when we started to produce my first professional album, *It's About Time*. Then we produced a show to tour that CD which was called *It's About Time Already*.

He told me to not hold back. He told me to speak out loud, count off for the band and to permit myself to be the leader. I have always had huge respect for instrumentalists and I didn't want to tell them what to do but



they wanted me to tell them what to do.

MC: *For poetry in some circles in Paris there are still rigid rules of declamation. The same goes with some of the classic canon of chanson. How are the Gallic portions of your set received in Paris?*

LH: I was really relieved and really happy that they received me well. I didn't even want to put anything French in the set list. When I put the set list together I very much favored English language songs from the Great American Songbook. The pianist that I performed with, Sheldon Forrest, said "You are developing a reputation for being an international singer with an international repertoire; I would not hold back. I think that you should do this." He encouraged me also because he knew that the audience for this show would be not only French but also a lot of ex-pats. So with that in mind I went ahead and put in a German song, several Italian songs, several French songs and some English American Songbook songs. It went over extremely well and I was extremely relieved.



Lua Hadar with Jason Martineau@Mikhail Rezhepp

MC: *For the more casual traveler there is a rigid definition of what "is" Paris. The Eiffel Tower, berets etc., but a lot of what we think of as quintessentially Parisian was absorbed into the culture via somewhere else. Edith Piaf was of Italian parents (real name Edith Giovanna Gassion). Picasso was Spanish, Van Gough Dutch. Your Parisian flavor is authentic but not in trying to recreate artificially an atmosphere or bygone days, it is your totem of the city, what it gives you.*

LH: What a fabulous thing to say. That's so insightful on your part about them and about me and about Paris. For many different reasons France and Paris have been in my life as I've grown up. I think the first time I went to Paris I was fifteen. I have no idea how many times I have been in and out of Paris. I have by no means lost my love or curiosity for Paris. There is so much I still have yet to know about Paris but it is kind of like how I intersect with Paris.

MC: *Languages seem to be one of your muses. What other nonmusic things inspire your work?*

LH: I love to cook. I don't know if the cooking inspires my work or if my work inspires the cooking but I find it to be a great creative expression. One of the great joys of my life is to have friends over for a nice European style dinner party where you linger into the evening and finish with an after-dinner drink and discuss all sorts of fun things. It's all sort of part of my life.

But I don't like to measure! All I want to know is the ingredients. I don't want to know how much. You know you're going to put some thyme in there, some lemon etc. From there I just sort of smell it and feel it and add whatever I think needs to be added; which is exactly like jazz. You learn that standard song so that you know how it goes and then once you know what the ingredients are, you see what comes from you. You have to follow your instincts - that's what makes it work.

MC: *How long will you promote the new album before the next project? What tells you it is time to move on?*

LH: We performed a show that was like a "Twist experiment", in that we had the trio plus the saxophonist, at the very end of October 2007. Then we began to record the CD in March of 2008. I am really happy that this most recent show, French Connection, still has a strong relationship to the CD because four of the songs in the show are on the CD and that is a solid representation. So for now I know that the CD still represents us and when I get the gut feeling that we are doing something that we don't have a CD to represent, then we'll make another one. It's an internal clock with its own logic.

MC: *Do you find that because you incorporate elements of cabaret into your work that it is sort of venue specific, having more emotional impact in certain places over others?*

LH: I tailor the show to the audience and to the venue. Because we knew we were going to open this new show in the Razz Room in San Francisco, which is known as a jazz and cabaret room; I felt completely comfortable putting in a song like "The Golden Gate Bridge."

If I were to take the show to Yoshi's in Oakland I might take that song out. I might talk more or less because an audience in Yoshi's might be more interested in knowing the specific names of each songwriter and more about the history about how the song was developed into a jazz tune, like "Someday My Prince Will Come." I always tailor it to the audience.

MC: *To write about music, to file it in a store or on a site there must be a genre label assigned it. What is the biggest misconception about what you are about/do?*

LH: I think it is hard for people to get what we do. That is why I always appreciate when people write about us and take the time to see the big picture that goes beyond the pigeonhole. I suppose you could call us alternative jazz depending on how you can define that.

People need to take the time to understand who you are, why you are doing it and where it's come from and what the elements of it are in order to understand you. If I am going to be pigeonholed with the myriad jazz artists of the world - somebody is going to be a more authentic jazz artist than I am because I am my own mélange. I think what we do is some that is eclectic. I take cumulative influences in my life and they stay there. I think we all become the sum total of our experiences and for me that shows up in my music as well.

MC: *What is your dream project?*

LH: My as yet unrealized dream project is a world tour for Twist. I am working on it but I really want to bring this music all around the world. I want to sing for audiences in Asia, Europe, Africa, Australia...everywhere.

Visit Lua and check her itinerary at www.luahadar.com

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