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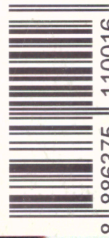
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06



Happiness is a Good Story

Laurie Anderson, unplugged

BY SHUEH-LI ONG

Subject: Laurie Anderson.**Occupation:** Artist.**A.k.a.:** Violinist, technologist, songwriter, storyteller, multimediatrix.**Crime:** Posing as an avant-garde performance artist.**Defence:** "The phrase performance art is clumsy. It does not say much except it is not theatre.

Avant-garde is not a march towards invention... it does not just have to be new, but beautiful!"

Laurie Anderson comes from a rare breed of multi-talented artistes proud to be a "jack of all trades". Trained as a classical violinist, she first appeared in the performance art scene in New York in the 1970s. Pre-empting MTV style entertainment, she went in search of that something new and beautiful, and amalgamated music, stories, technology and art into her much-talked about hallmark of multimedia extravaganzas, as seen in *Songs and Stories from Moby Dick* (a multimedia stage adaptation of Melville's classic) and *United States I-IV* (an eight hour spectacular).

The name Laurie Anderson is also synonymous with fabulous electronic musical instruments of her design. The Talking Stick works on the principle of granular synthesis played by changing its position and moving the hand along the shaft, while the Tape-Bow violin consists of magnetic tape on a bow which runs along a playback head attached to the bridge of the violin.

During our transatlantic phone interview, Anderson, who resides in New York, discussed her latest solo piece *Happiness*, and the many issues that plague musicians today. Issues such as: is formal musical training over-rated, should there be strict rules of composition, does a collection of electronics constitute a musical instrument, and more.

"The great thing about music and art is that there are no rules. It is a situation that is totally free (and maybe) it is a rule that it has to be that way. An instrument can be a pencil on the table, or a cell phone. You can make anything you want and call it anything you want. It's just limiting to say, it can only be the wooden/metal instruments used hundreds of years ago in classical music! I love it when people experiment and build their own things. What matters is not what it is made of, but how that musician is expressing himself or herself."

If you have learnt to regurgitate rules flawlessly, "you are not a musician but a technician. We have too many technicians in the world and not enough free thinkers!"

Laurie Anderson is coming to town! Lock up your children lest they be turned into recalcitrants?!

Is that mild-mannered voice that hauntingly embraced every track on my

all-time favourite, *Mister Heartbreak*, taunting us and breaking the hearts of us classically trained?

In the same breath she validates formal training and admits: "I am a complete sucker for 19th-century violin concertos!"

In a society that receives constant bombardment of every new fangled musical tool, with the latest marketing catch-phrase being "you too can be a composer with a computer", is it really easier for anyone to be a musician?

"Like graphics, too many people utilise the same tools. Each piece starts looking the same, it becomes hard to be inventive. These tools are powerful but they make things look slick and nothing else. The challenge for young artists is to take the programs and make something original out of it. In a way it is harder because it is more sophisticated. But is it better?"

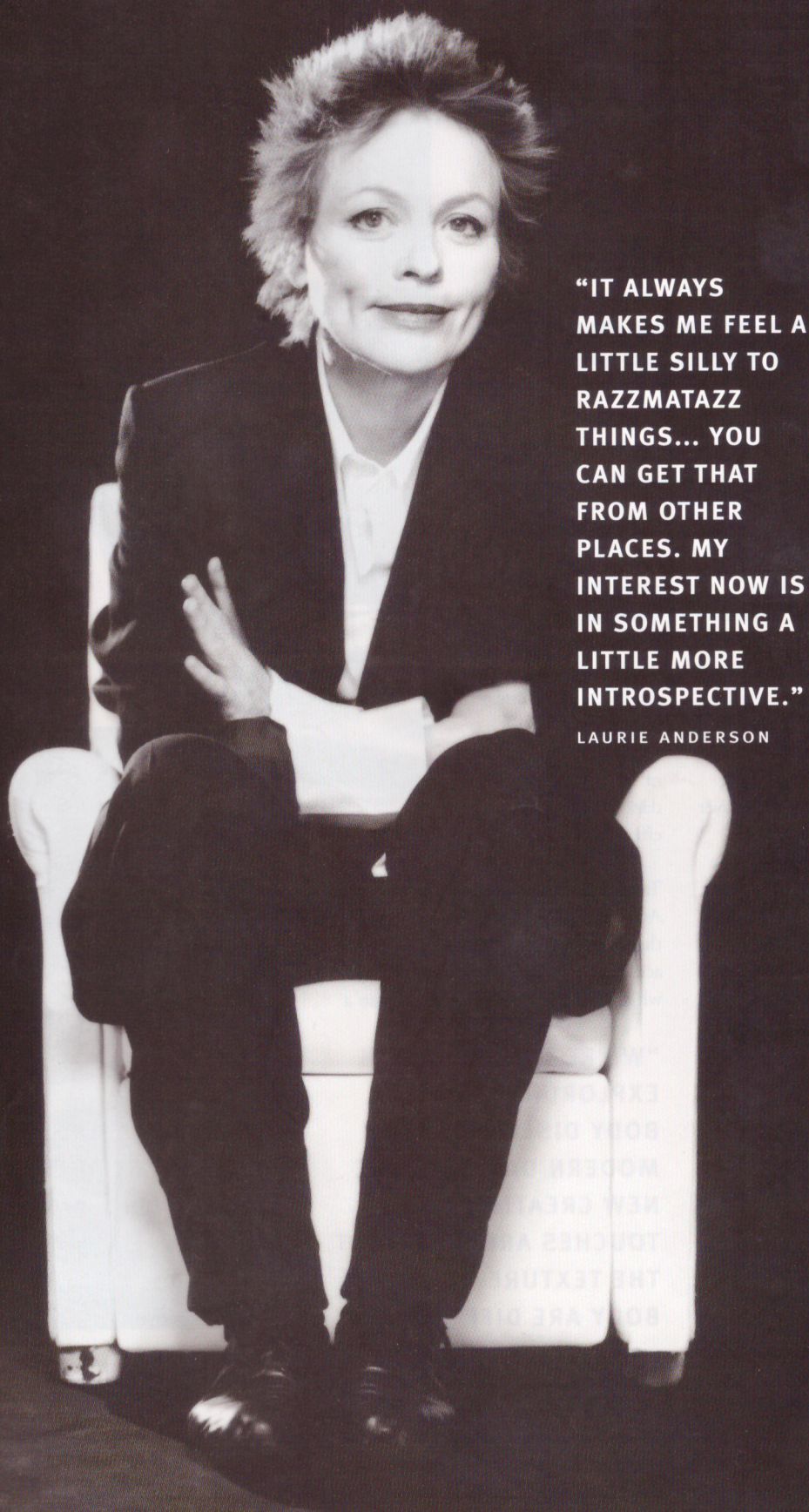
She continues: "We tend to mythologise technology and think that it really is more than it is! It is... a bunch of (smart) plastic! If we do not use it well, it is not technology's fault. The downside is in trusting it and not using our own senses."

For those who are precious about their brand of music and snub their noses at the rest, Anderson warns us about favouring a homogenous pop culture. "There is room in this world for any type of music," then seriously jests, "the more it is liked the worse it must be!"

So is there a current style she favours? Rap. Its attraction is in the way the words are "spoken".

This fetish with the spoken language is evident in her albums, where her voice is sometimes left au naturel, other times processed, but always meditative in its naturally occurring undulations, breaks and repetitions. I became hooked on Anderson after listening to *O Superman* in the 80s, the song that rose to number two on the British pop charts and subsequently appeared on her album *Big Science*.

Beckoning us further into her world of temporal mischief, she continues: "Time is one of the most interesting mysteries. Many thought structures/belief systems try to explain it. Is there a heaven, was there a moment when things were created, how does time move? I



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think of things as spoken operas... and am interested in the way people use time in their conversation. We don't talk in structures that have rhythm, but in starts and stops with pauses... go back and forth. I find that beautiful – the rhythm of spoken language before it is organised into patterns."

Language evolves naturally and is not forced into a predetermined structure. It is with this conscience that Anderson approaches her musical creations. She does not use anything out of its box. In a very organic way she alters the sounds that are already there, such as utilising filters to enhance the harmonics usually out of the range of human hearing.

When Anderson comes to Singapore this year, she will be bringing her storytelling vehicle, *Happiness*, with her. *Happiness* is a deliberate shift from her multimedia events to something very simple. This "jack of all trades" wants to be a master storyteller.

"What I really love is stories," she reveals. The artist gleans her stories from her audience. To the person sitting there who thinks they are invisible, Laurie has this to say: "You're really not!"

So what is the entertainment value left in a show sans the bells and whistles of a multimedia spectacular? Anderson is not interested in showy statements that demand the audience's affirmation. "It always makes me feel a little silly to razzmatazz things... you can get that from other places. My interest now is in something a little more introspective. And it does make demands on the audience because one of the ways in which I am doing this is through a series of jump-cuts. You hear a story about Paul Revere, then suddenly the Dalai Lama and Andy Warhol ...".

Though Laurie Anderson will be performing unplugged, expect at least 80 plugs with violin, keyboard, digital processes, led by a story.

You will be asked to make your own connections.

You will be asked odd questions.

And you will be visible ☒

Happiness is on 24 Feb at Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, Concert Hall

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