

An Interview of Liu Sola by Michelle Caswell

Singing the Chinese Blues



NEW YORK, May 1, 2001

Composer and novelist Liu Sola spoke with the Asia Society in advance of the Asia Society's May 9, 2001 concert Crossovers: Sola and Friends.

You're well known as a novelist in China. I think it's really interesting that someone who has this other life as a writer composes songs that are made up of abstract sounds rather than words. How does your writing inform your music? Why do you choose to use sounds rather than words in your music when words compose the bulk of your literary life?

I'm not trained as a professional writer but I am trained as a professional musician and composer. I've been looking for a musical style for a long time. It's harder for me to achieve my musical style than it is to achieve my writing style. I was educated in China and I learned only about classical music composition. No one ever introduced me to blues and jazz. In China, folk music is mostly used for propaganda. Classical music is also a mainstream thing. That's all we know about music. Somehow there was something I needed that I couldn't find

in China. Even after I studied classical music, I just didn't feel right. It was more simple to explain in writing so people immediately understood my writing and got excited about it. I was still searching for my musical style. I left China and came to the States and heard blues for the first time. That changed my life. It has taken more than ten years to really find my musical style since then.

How were you first exposed to blues and jazz?

The first time I heard blues was in Chicago in 1987, the first time I came to the States. It was a shock. I decided that this is something I have to study. I never heard about it before 1987. There was nothing about blues in China.

Is that still true today?

In China today there is still more interest in Western mainstream culture. Everything written in history books is about classical music. People still think blues music and jazz music is not mainstream. But it's a slow process. There is a Chinese jazz festival now. I think it takes time to put in people's mind that the most beautiful soul music is from the US. For me, I went in this direction and it took me a long time to find my style. What is it about blues and jazz in particular that attracts you and lends itself to this combination with traditional Chinese music? It's very soulful music. When I first heard blues, I could feel the soul. The singers know soul.... That really touched me, especially because I like to write fiction. I feel very emotional about that music. From the way blues singers and jazz musicians communicate, I hear Chinese music. I understand one side of Chinese music that I've never been taught when I was in China. In our education, people forget there is soulful Chinese music.... From blues and jazz, I heard Chinese music. I started digging to find what was actually there in Chinese music. This is my life-long research. The sound of your voice transcends boundaries. Using sounds rather than words gives the music a transcendental, other-worldly quality. There is more room for imagination without lyrics. The voice then becomes like an instrument. Using words is like writing poetry, but if you don't sing words, it's like writing novels or fiction. The sentence can be long or short. Also in fiction things can be completely emotional. That's why I don't use lyrics.

How much of your work has been affected by the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution?

I'm trying very hard to not be influenced by it. Because of the Cultural Revolution, our musical style is very romantic and revolutionary, including the way we play music and the way we listen to music. I'm trying to change the past and that's a very difficult thing to do. After I came out of China for half of my life, I realized that I've been taught everything all wrong -- the way music should be heard, the way the piano should be played. I have to try very hard to get rid of those ideas.

Have you performed in China recently? How is your work received?

The audience in China loved it. It was very surprising. Before I went there, I told the musicians to be prepared. Maybe the audience will think we're worse than they think we are here. Here people call me avant-garde and most people don't accept my music. People here think they know more about culture. Before I went there, my friends heard I was going to come back. All of my friends were worried. They said, "Suppose we go to Sola's concert and there is no audience or the audience doesn't like it. What are we going to tell her?" And so they all told each other to say, "Good, we really enjoy it." So everyone was nervous about this concert. The first five minutes after I started, some people in the audience started crying and immediately we got a really warm reaction from the audience. Some of my friends were so happy that suddenly they didn't need to lie to me. I didn't realize that people would cry. I try so hard to find the soul of Chinese music and bring that soul out in my music. The people felt it. In the Cultural Revolution, most of us went into the countryside. We know about [rural culture] not from our formal education, but from working in the countryside. It was a beautiful culture and very different from what we see in the city. The way I play, I was really trying to go back to the countryside, and some people in the audience really felt that. They felt like they are in the village again. People have the idea that jazz and blues are western and very modern, but for me they are not. They are soul music and folk music. They are real and original. I don't think there is a gap. We all have this real thing inside. That's what I am looking at with this music. In Beijing the audience was a range of ages. Some audience members were 70 years old. Then we went to Shanghai. Shanghai's audience was all young kids. They looked at us like pop musicians. They loved it. All of the kids were very excited. It seems like the Shanghai audience knew more about western music and were more modernized than in Beijing. After the performance in Shanghai I went backstage and there was a cleaning man who came up to me and said, "I am so happy I want to tell you. For 50 years working in this concert hall, only foreign jazz bands come here. The Chinese audience applauds for foreign bands, but when a Chinese band

comes, no one applauds. This is the first time there is a Chinese band on stage and we are all so happy and applaud." I never heard that kind of thing before.... I thought everything I do is too avant-garde.

Do you think the pipa is a soulful instrument?

Any instrument can sound soulful. The reason I use the pipa is because I met a pipa player.... All Chinese instruments can be soulful, depending on the direction of the musician. What matters is taste. Chinese musicians can achieve so many different kinds of style. That's the special thing about China's tradition of musicians. If you ask them to play Tchaikovsky or Rachmaninov, they can play it. They can play folk, they can play whatever. You give them the score, they can do it, whatever the style....

How did you form the particular band you're with now?

I worked with all of these musicians the first time I came to the States six or seven years earlier. Amina [Claudine Myers] was there.... Wu Mann was also there. We've worked together all these years. I learned a lot from my musicians, especially Amina. In the whole United States, she's the most soulful musician. Her voice and the way she plays piano and the way she treats music is so full of soul.... With Amina, I never worry. When she comes on stage, she gives you this really warm feeling. She always supports me. It's not about whether she's classically trained or not. For me, it's how you approach the music. The notes are full of the musician's own life. It's not about training... with people like Amina, the notes just come out. That's her life. Nobody can repeat those sounds.

Do you think that in order to be a good blues musician you have to endure some sort of suffering or tragedy? Perhaps you can relate to African American music because of the suffering you endured during the Cultural Revolution.

Yes, maybe it's because of the Revolution [that I am interested in the blues]. But I understood the blues only after I came to the US. When I was first in Memphis, I couldn't sing the blues. I tried so hard and decided I just don't have that. After I came back to the States from London, I had some experience of being a Chinese person in the States and struggling. I felt the blues then. I said now I feel it, now I can sing the blues.... Then I felt

this thing is with me.... Maybe you're just born with it. If you want to ignore it, then fine, it won't come out. It doesn't matter if you're Chinese or black. On the inside it's there, if you want to search for it. If you listen to Chinese music before 1949, there's lots of blues in China. The way they sing and the way they view music is the blues. The music deals with life. [Chinese musicians] used to tell personal stories with their music and even if the music was not about a personal story, they put their personal feelings into the music. It was very hard for me to bring that out. For African Americans, they have that tradition.... For us, it's been erased. We're not allowed to look inside. During the Cultural Revolution we couldn't. We were not allowed. But now we've lost it. We just can't do it. We pretend. When you're used to listening to other people telling you what to do, you form your emotions around that and later you just don't have [any emotions]. It's really hard for me. I feel like I live many lives. I left China when I was 30 years old. Before I left, there was a part of my soul I didn't know. I spent ten years digging out my soul.

There has been some press lately in the US about how blues is dying out and how even in the South there are so few blues musicians left and they are all really old. What do you think is the future of blues music?

If you want to hear the future of the blues, go to China! Then you can find the soul.

Interview conducted by Michelle Caswell for the Asia Society.