

Strange Angel

Originally published July 11, 1996 in the Phoenix New Times.

BY DAVID HOLTHOUSE

"I'm stripping it down," says Laurie Anderson from her Manhattan studio. "I'm going to be the avant-garde of the technological backlash."

Anderson speaks of her new live performance piece, "The Speed of Darkness," a program of songs and storytelling she is about to take on a minitour of Western cities that culminates in two dates at Scottsdale Center for the Arts later this week. Anderson was a multimedia performance artist before either term was absorbed into the popular lexicon. Her last show, "The Nerve Bible," employed an elaborate industrial set of girders and other building guts, an extensive system of linked video monitors and multimedia screens, and a body suit that responded to certain gestures with preprogrammed sound effects. It was her first piece in five years, and her most tech-heavy ever. "The Nerve Bible" (the title is Anderson's metaphor for the human body) required more than 33 tons of equipment—two semis' worth.

She plans to arrive in the Valley with little more than several instrument cases and a satchel. "I've simplified," she says. "Of course, simple for me is still some stuff." For "The Speed of Darkness," Anderson's "stuff"—her word for high-tech gadgetry—will top out at a souped-up violin, a keyboard and a digital processor for sound effects. There will be no set, and no visuals.

Despite all the Blade Runner pageantry of "The Nerve Bible," Anderson's last performance piece demonstrated a move away from her usual bemused fascination with cutting-edge technology toward a critical foreboding, a sense that the toys may be turning on us. She performed several spoken-word segments before giant screens depicting bombing-run footage from the Persian Gulf War that looked frighteningly like a video game. In another she turned repetitions of Internet addresses, "http," "double back slash" and "dot com," into a mocking mantra.

When Anderson previewed "The Speed of Darkness" earlier this month in Boulder, Colorado, she performed from three imaginary rooms—a theatre, a mental hospital and a control room. Those three spaces, she says, have metaphorically "merged to form late-20th-century techno culture." Anderson says the theme of her new work is, quite simply, "the future of technology." Is the mission well in hand, or has there been, as the space shuttle Challenger mission-control announcer so memorably understated, a major malfunction?

Contacted at the Tribeca live/work space she shares with Lou Reed, Anderson spoke to New Times about her new work, the merits of the World Wide Web, severe altitude sickness, and her bedrock optimism for the human race.

New Times: So when you look to the future of technology, what do you see?

Laurie Anderson: Well, it's not a pretty picture. But maybe I've gotten jaded. Maybe I've been attending too many tech conferences. Because everybody at those things has like these glowing visions of how cool everything's going to be, but it comes off to me like just a way to get people to get more stuff. Which disturbs me, because I look forward and I see technology splitting us pretty cleanly into people who have the stuff and people who don't. And for the people who can't keep up, life is going to get really, really hard.

NT: Did that observation have anything to do with scaling back your live show?

LA: That's it exactly. I became frustrated that I was working with so many pieces of equipment. Stripping down comes from wanting to find out what you can do without a ton of stuff. Well, more than a ton of stuff. We actually had to weigh all my stuff on the last tour, and it was 77,000 pounds. It filled two huge trucks. It was ridiculous. I thought, "I've got to find another way to tell some stories."

NT: What's your home-computer setup like?

LA: Yeggh. You caught me. I have 11 of them strewn about my work space here, although a few of them are down at any given time with technical difficulties. I have so many because I like to be able to hop around. You know: Well, I was working on music, but I want to go over to Photoshop, right now. I admit there's an ambivalence at work here. I'm pretty addicted.

NT: How closely do you monitor the Laurie Anderson newsgroups on the Net?

LA: You know, I almost never drop in there. It's sort of in the same category as listening to my old records or reading my own reviews. Plus, I don't do that well in chat rooms. Some of them are nice, but I can't type well very fast, so my stuff is full of typos and I come off sounding pretty moronic. There are a few cool spots on the Web; I highly recommend one site called "Interspecies Communication," but, overall, I just don't like to waste that much time online.

NT: You see the Web as a waste of time?

LA: I'm just not so sure that it actually connects people. Again, I'm ambivalent. I mean, you can find old friends, and that's nice, but I think in many ways the Web is pretty antisocial. I like live things. I

like to be in groups of actual people, as opposed to their clones or their avatars or whoever they send out on the Web to represent themselves.

NT: As a veteran of the avant-garde, do you hold out hope that the Web could help decommercialize art, especially the distribution of popular music, by cutting out the middlemen?

LA: Funny thing about those middlemen—they always seem to find the middle. And if they can't find it, they'll stamp one out. I did hold that hope for a few minutes until I realized that, well, the Web's just sort of a big mall. We're a country of salespeople, and we'll find ways to sell it. So, no, I think that unfortunately the Web's not going to be this Utopian thing. And it's not the Web's fault. It's all these people who are thinking "How can I make money on the Net?" And they'll find a way. Because that is all they think about.

NT: On your own Web page, The Green Room [voyagerco.com], you recently installed a series of automated writing programs [where users set strict parameters on diction and the computer spits a short story back at them]. What was the impetus there?

LA: I really just wanted a way for you to figure out what you want to say. I realized that a lot of times I write to find out what I actually think. Because unless you really have to articulate a thought, sometimes it remains a little bit vague. So those programs are a way to generate a lot of different kinds of words and throw them against a wall and see which ones feel interesting and get you out of your rut.

Initially, that project came out of a desire to write a song using only the 100 most frequently used words in the English language. Of course, those words depend on your mode of selection. I culled them from a McGraw-Hill database of written English, so I wound up with sort of the most common words in news-magazine English. And I started working only with that list because I wanted to get away from my habit of using the same kinds of words in my work.

It's part of the same motivation that makes me want to do a stripped-down tour. The idea of "What can I do with 100 of the most simple words; what can I make of that?" But the thing about that list is that there are only like six nouns. Most of the words are linguistic glue—"before, after, when, beyond, around, because." The nouns were like "man, time, place." So I went up to another cut—250 words this time. I kind of hoped to get the word "women" in there, but "women" is not even in the most-used 250 words. They do, however, include "boy" and "boys." But no "women" and no "girls" or "girl."

NT: That's rather telling.

LA: Yeah. I had a feeling we were a special-interest group, but I didn't know it was that extreme.

NT: Any other surprising omissions?

LA: Well, "love" isn't there. But then neither is "anger." I'm friends with this writer Salman Rushdie, and he came by while I was working on this list and pointed out that there aren't many negative words on it. He said, "For example, you can't say anything very violent. The only way you could . . ." And then he looked at the list, and picking out words one by one, he said, "I would like to end your life." And we all were sitting around this table at lunch going "Wow, Salman, what a choice of sentence there, man." It was really a conversation stopper. It was like, "Whoah. Wonder what that guy has on his mind?"

NT: You have that line in "Monkey's Paw" [Strange Angels, 1989]: "Well, I stopped in at the body shop and said to the guy, 'I want stereo FM installed in my teeth . . . and, while you're at it, why don't you give me some of those high-heeled feet?!" Are there any cyberpunk sci-fi-style biotech enhancements you would actually go for if they became available?

LA: I'd like to be able to fly whenever I want, so I might go for some wings. I'd also like the sensation of being incredibly small or incredibly big. Oh, yeah, there's a lot of things I'd like to do in that area.

NT: What do you see as the human body's greatest weakness?

LA: That we die.

NT: Which you almost did three years ago in the Himalayas [Anderson was stricken with severe altitude sickness at 22,000 feet on an expedition to find Llama Latso, the fabled lake where the next Dalai Lama's name is written on the surface of the water in code]. Visionary hallucinations are a common effect of AS—did you experience any?

LA: Oh, yes. Golden bells ringing on the horizon, going "boom, boom, boom." The whole sky pulsating. Voices calling to me. I lost my hearing for two days and the only thing I could hear were those bells and the voices. Once I got beyond the pain, it was very euphoric. I was laughing a lot of the time. It was wild and beautiful, the most intense experience of my life, by far.

NT: You've performed several times in the Phoenix area. What's your impression?

LA: I've never had the time to explore it. I really liked the people who came to the shows. I felt like they got it, and that was a pleasant surprise. Because in a lot of ways I think of myself as an artist who can just play certain major cities—San Francisco, New York, L.A. So when I got to Phoenix, I was really surprised that it was a cool scene.

NT: Any cities where you've played the lead balloon?

LA: Nashville would probably fall in that category. I got a lot of blank stares in Nashville. It was really weird. People were like shouting "Play country," and I was like, "But I don't know any country music; I'm really sorry." But I can't blame them. They're having a good time in Nashville, and that's good. It's a party town. It just wasn't for me. I'm not a pop artist, and it helps when people don't come expecting pop entertainment.

NT: So what's your opinion of the three-minute pop song?

LA: Writing a good short song is extremely hard, so I have great admiration for anyone who does that. But, then again, I like every kind of music. No, that's not true—I hate Broadway shows. I mean I really hate them. But there's something in almost all other music that I find interesting.

NT: Even country?

LA: Yeah, because it's so emotional. At its best, it can make me really cry. And I like that.

NT: What about techno?

LA: It's cool in the background. Techno is music without a foreground. But that's all right. I've got plenty of things to do in the foreground.

NT: Hip-hop?

LA: Definitely cool. Especially if the words are good. Of course, they're usually not that good, but, in a lot of cases, it doesn't matter 'cause the hip-hop attitude comes through strong. It's like "Look at me! I am so cool." And that's great. Everybody should think they're ultracool. The world would be a much better place.

NT: On your last album, Bright Red, you said, "What I really want to know is this: Are things getting better or are they getting worse?" ["Tightrope"] That was two years ago. Any conclusions?

LA: I see that generally things are getting better. But I'm a hopeless optimist. I look for things getting better rather than worse because, you know, we gotta live here. And I believe everyone has the choice between being an optimist and a pessimist, no matter what happens to you. You can make terrible ideas out of good things and, of course, vice versa. So for the sake of convenience and happiness, I choose to be an optimist.

NT: One concern that registers throughout your work has to do with how America's Puritan ancestors sort of still loom over the spirit of this country like a ghost. Do you think we'll ever exorcise their ghosts?

LA: I think that in spite of our Puritan roots Americans are pretty fun-loving. We genuinely like fun. We value it. Go to some place like Germany, where it's really all about work, and you'll see that loving fun is an amazing achievement for a people to make. Another big achievement America has made over its Puritan history is that we're friendly. Just in the sort of way where you get in a cab with somebody you don't know and you're like, "Hey, what's happening, who are you, what are you doing today?" There's a startling difference in that respect between Americans and some Europeans. I think a lot of Americans experience that when they travel. . . . Friendliness just comes more naturally to Americans. And strangely enough, to Tibetans as well. That's one of the reasons I think Americans and Tibetans have this strange sense of kinship. Anyway, seeing that friendliness rise out of this democracy is a thrill. I see this growing lack of fear at making contact with other people. It took a while to build, but I think it's become more and more pronounced. So there—that's one solid, good thing about the future.

NT: Any other signs you would point to in support of optimism?

LA: Restlessness. I have this sense that people are very restless these days, and that's always a good sign. Because it means they're questioning and some of the answers are making them uncomfortable, and that's the only way things ever get better on a large scale.