Voice Full of Joy - An Interview with Dominique Eade

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Are you at home? It's nice to be able to picture where you are.

DE: Yes, out in the backyard; I'm sitting by the sandbox.

So you have children?

DE: Yes. That's why I'm in the backyard. I'm hiding from my 1 1/2 year old who is going to wake up from a nap any second.

Well let's take advantage of the quiet and talk about music. When did music enter your life?

DE: I had a pretty musical family. My mother played classical piano quite well. She made sure that everybody – I'm the youngest of 5 – and she made sure we all got music lessons. I also studied dance for a while. My father, though he's not a musician, loves to sing and both he and my mother love to listen to lots of music and so there was lots of classical music, including plenty of 20th century stuff, which was great. And also, a pretty good jazz collection up to, but not including, bebop. So music was really, you know ... between older sisters who were practicing piano and who were playing guitar and music being played in the house ... also going to attend concerts. My parents were really avid supporters of live music. There was always lots of music around.

Is there any one concert or recording or incident that stands out in your mind as having a major impact on your life?

DE: There are a few along the way. It depends on what time you're looking at. I remember something quite early, before kindergarten, going to hear something at my sister's school and some high school age girls sang 3-part harmony to "Winkin Blinkin & Nod." I was just completely dumb struck by the sound of the voices singing in 3-part harmony like that. It was really overwhelming. You know, I almost remember it like a dream still... that moment. And also when I was a little bit older, about 9 I guess, I was dancing in a version of the Nutcracker Suite where there actually was an entire symphony orchestra even though we lived in Nebraska. That was a pretty decent production and there were soloists that were brought in from New York. I remember waiting in the wings at however many performances we did at that for a couple of years in a row at least, and just listening to the overture of that piece, and also having that same really overwhelming feeling as if I had entered into another element.

What did that feeling do to you? Can you put those feelings into words?

DE: It almost stops time in some way. You know, it alters time. It puts a wrinkle in what, even at that young of an age, I suppose I had come to feel as the ordinary chain of events, and ... and ... it seemed to draw from something else, you know and stop the basic daily life that was happening and be about something else.

Where did you grow up? And how did that shaped your later life?

DE: My father was in the Air Force. I was born in England and did not live there very long. We did a transatlantic boat crossing when I was 6 months old. I lived most of the rest of the time in different parts of the United States. In the south a little bit, in Louisiana and Texas, Nebraska, Virginia. And then when I was in high school we moved to Germany. My father was stationed in Germany. And I lived for the last 3 years in high school in Germany. Then came back to the United States when I went to college.

Where did you go?

DE: I went to Vassar for 2 years as an English major. I had no concept ... I already was a performing musician, writing and playing, but really didn't think about doing it for a living because it was just something I did all the time. I never thought of what it took to actually make a career as a musician. So I went to Vassar as an English

major for 2 years and realized that as good as the classes were that I really wanted to be a musician full-time. I took a leave of absence and I did some studies at Berklee College in Boston, then transferred over to New England Conservatory and finished my undergraduate degree ... 6 years later. (laughs)

You said that you were performing even before going to college. What kind of performing were you doing?

DE: I got a guitar when I was about 12. My brother is the oldest in the family and he had played guitar and been kind of an active musician. He was out in Haight Ashbury kind of at the height of the hippie thing. I remember he came back playing the tune "Coconut Grove" and I had that same revelatory experience when he played that. So there were lots of guitars in the family. I got my own guitar when I was 12 and right away starting writing songs. When we moved to Germany – between some of the repertoire that I covered (which was already starting to get a little bit into jazz because I had heard, kind of importantly, a Thelonius Monk record and a Billie Holiday record that had really started to get me a little bit into jazz) ... between a little bit of jazz repertoire and what I was writing, I had enough stuff to do shows. So I was doing coffee houses in Stuttgart where we lived.

Well you've sort of taken us straight to the fact that you are a composer and arranger. Can you talk a little bit about your process or your approach as a composer-arranger?

DE: Sure. It's interesting because it's something that has changed a lot in the last 4 to 5 years. I have 2 children, one is just turning 5; the other is 1 ½, and before they came along I used to spend quite a bit more time actually at the piano. Maybe the initial idea didn't come at that point ... and sometimes it did ... but I used to use the time at the piano and with paper and pencil to generate my ideas. Now I have a lot less time to do that. But I'm not writing all that much less, which is interesting. I'm writing a lot more in the process of whatever else I'm doing in my daily life -- in transit or strolling a baby, or ... or doing housework or, you know, any number of things. Usually I get some kind of inspiration for a piece of music ... it often comes with a kind of melodic and harmonic idea, and sometimes there's a text, an idea for a lyric that may come along with that. And now, as I said, my process now is to really work that through mentally. By the time I go to write something down, the piece is maybe 70 to 95 percent done.

That's amazing to me.

DE: It's interesting to me lyrically because I think it's changing the way that I'm writing. It's a little less hypothetical. You know if I have the moment of inspiration in the moment, I can't necessarily race away to chase it down in seclusion, so I have to keep the ball rolling in the process of whatever else is going on.

When you are in the process, do you ever draw inspiration from other art forms?

DE: Oh, yeah. Absolutely. And that's actually been kind of a long-time inspiration because as well as being supporters of music, my mother especially was quite a supporter of visual arts. In fact she sometimes worked in museums and would take me along. Since I was the youngest kid, I often tagged along with her for things and sometimes I would be running around a museum all day while she was doing volunteer work at the desk or something like that. And I still love to draw. It's great having kids because you get sort of specialized as a musician and you don't do a lot of these other things that were interesting to you. And now, of course, all the crayons, scissors, and glue and stuff is all out. (laughs) It's fun to get into that. So yeah, I don't feel that much of a difference between being inspired by great visual artists as I am when I'm inspired by something musical.

Let's talk a little bit about your last CDs. You picked all the material and did the arrangements yourself. You must have put a lot of thought into this particular collection.

DE: Right. "A Long Way Home" was a very personal statement. I was looking over repertoire that I was performing and realized that a lot of it, not surprisingly, had to do with the idea of home. I had fairly recently moved back to Boston from New York City and there was a bit of longing. I mean I'm very happy here but there's a bit of longing for New York – if you've had a home and gone from home and longed for home and longed to run away from home – and all those things. Just kind of looking at home, also with having children,

and thinking about what it means to create a home for somebody else to grow up in. So the songs that I chose had to do in some way or another with the theme of home – either yearning for home that you can't go back to or creating a home that feels like a center – and came mostly from the repertoire I was doing at the time along with some new stuff. So that gave me a pretty wide range material, from Elton John to Ornette Coleman.

Yes, with a little Frank Loesser thrown in.

DE: Exactly! Well, I always have to do Frank Loesser. He's my favorite.

Really!?

DE: One thing is that he writes his own lyrics which is interesting -- to have somebody doing both music and lyric. I think that's very often the case with him. And I don't know ... there's some kind of interesting balance between jazz and some kind of homespun Americana... some kind of balance between those two things that I can really relate to.

Tell me a little bit about the musicians you chose. I'm always really curious about the musical interaction and especially from your perspective because one of the things that's always said about you is "she's not really a singer, she's a musician."

DE: Good ...

So I want to know what that phrase means to you and then how that applies to your musical relationships. What are you looking for in these players that says "oh, I want them on this record"?

DE: It's different in each case. One of the things is just being able to play music over a long period of time. You develop these relationships with people. Like Bruce Barth and I, for instance, had worked together for years. I knew him up in Boston and when I moved to Brooklyn, we were neighbors and we would get together and play all the time. He's always been really supportive of my writing. Always asking, "What's new? What are you writing? Let me hear the new thing." So that's an old, good relationship and something I just really cherish having. Dave Holland is also someone that I've known for awhile. Concurrent with my teaching at New England Conservatory, I got a degree called an Artist Diploma, which prior to that had been all classical. I think I was the first jazz person to get it. It's kind of a prestigious performing kind of degree. And what it means is you get to study for two years with whomever you want. At that time the pianist Stanley Cowell and Dave Holland happened to be on our faculty, so I studied with Dave over that two-year period. I've always thought of him as just such a consummate musician; anytime he's playing I want to hear. So when I thought about the repertoire and the way the bass was kind of featured in this recording, Dave was an easy choice. It's interesting, we had done some duo playing while I studied with him, but I'm almost too in awe of him and I really needed to keep my bearings as I worked with him. Because sometimes when people ... what I really look for with oh, it's a chipmunk in my downspout with just his nose poking out, so funny. He must have been here all along like waiting for the moment to run away — but anyway, what I look for in a musician is somebody who's interactive in a very direct way. I think maybe what people mean when they say "she's a musician" may be because I write but also because I improvise and I'm really listening for people who are responding in a very direct way. I think when people play in a very straight-ahead setting, that can be true. I don't think it's necessarily so unique or it's not necessarily such a stylistic thing, but what I feel for me is a level of responding that there isn't such a perimeter around it in terms of what's acceptable and what isn't. Sometimes when people play for singers, they put everything in a very neat little box. And it can work beautifully for certain people. But it doesn't work for me. With Dave, he, on one hand, is as solid as an oak tree and on the other hand, he can really let go and communicate. That makes him really incredible to work with.

Last week Lewis Nash and I were talking about how different singers with different styles really need different kinds of musical support from the musicians who work with them.

DE: Lewis is somebody else I've played with and recorded with and he's a dear friend. He's played with so many different kinds of people that he can read their feel, like some people claim to see auras. (laughs) I don't know that I'm that aware of what I project to other musicians in terms of style in that way. I think the interactive thing is definitely part of it because I do know that sometimes somebody plays something and I don't necessarily sing what they did, but I give a little musical wink to say, "Hello, I heard that," and some people, if they haven't worked with me before, are a little bit surprised. I just really value the moment, creating the piece of music in the moment and really trying to be an improviser

What artists have really caught your ear and intrigued you for some specific reason?

DE: There's so much stuff it's almost overwhelming. Going back to that other question about style, I feel like the musicians, even if we are playing a certain style and we stick with it and get that style, there is an awareness that this isn't the only style that exists and that are very real and moving to us too. That's what I was saying about Dave – whatever genre and whatever format he's playing in, the level of integrity is always the same. And I guess that's what I feel for myself, probably somewhat in terms of the time that I came up. In the late '70s and early '80s, I don't feel like the boundaries really were quite as set as they are now. There was a little bit more of a free-for-all, stylistically.

When you were coming up then, early in your career, you weren't necessarily trying to develop an identifiable, definable style?

DE: I don't think so. I feel like I've always been after a particular thing but I've not known exactly what style it would end up in. I always felt like all those influences were very important and that I never wanted to make a choice where I was consciously saying 'now I have to do a moment of free improvisation, then a moment of bebop.' That would be really tedious. Whatever I'm trying to develop as a jazz language, it wants to incorporate these things rather than close them out.

Let's broaden from the word "style" to the idea of a "sound." Somebody turns on the radio and you immediately know when it's Billie, when it's Ella, when it's Sarah ... they all have very distinctive sounds. Do you feel that you have a particular distinctive sound and how would you characterize it, if you do?

DE: (sighs) I think I probably do, but more from what other people say to me about what they hear rather than what I myself hear.

Is there a discrepancy between what people say they hear and what you think you are putting out?

DE: Not so much a discrepancy but... it's like if you're throwing a ball, you're going to look to where you're throwing it; you're not looking at the ball. But somebody else looking back at you is going to be looking at the ball and how you're throwing it. So, I feel like my eye is on what I'm hearing, but the listener's focus is on the song. Does that make sense?

Yes, it does. I like the analogy.

DE: Although another part of it too, which is interesting, sometimes students say, "No, I don't want to imitate." It's like "Hey, did you never hear music in your life? Is there any way to escape any kind of imitation?" No. And it's perfectly natural in jazz to learn very directly from imitation. I read something that described it kind of like this: you do this and you can get it really really close to somebody else's style, but there's always this annoying part that doesn't sound like the other person, so you try again, imitating someone else and you get it really really close but again there's this annoying part that doesn't sound like the other person, and again and again, until after a while you realize that the annoying part is you." (laughs)

Let's talk about the relationship between the performer and the audience.

DE: That's a very interesting subject. Audiences really vary. One of the things that's interesting about where I happen to be based is that there are two very important jazz schools – New England Conservatory where I teach

and Berklee College of Music – and they've no shortage of really avid listeners. And that's really great to perform for an audience like that because they catch all the references and they understand what you're doing. Some people find that unsettling. I actually find it really inspiring to really be able to say all the things that I want to say. On the other hand, it can be so fascinating to go outside of a more 'informed' listening audience zone and play your music and see what it is that seems to get people interested. I like performing and I don't have any prewritten patter or anything like that. I really enjoy the moment of performance and try to connect with my audience whoever they may be.

Do you get to tour much?

DE: When the first RCA records came out, after each one of them, in spite of the fact that I'd just had my first child and was pregnant with my next for the other tour, I did get out and do a fair amount of traveling. Maybe not a lot by some people's standards but certainly for having some kids in tow, it was a good amount.

Tell me a little about that lifestyle, the touring with a child. How did that affect your mind and your body, not to mention your spirit and your music?

DE: Before I had had children, I had done nothing else that compared with the complexity of making music — even just the logistics of getting to the gig with everybody and all the music at the right time, let alone the complexities of actually making music. It felt like the ultimate responsibility, but of course having children definitely surpasses that. In some ways, although it's complicated my life logistically, it made music seem easy. I mean, I go do a gig and that's a piece of cake! That's very simple and really fun. I got to say just what I wanted to say and nobody interrupted me. But children are also incredibly inspiring because, you know, my 4 ½ year old is learning about the solar system and asking all those amazing questions of life that you think you know the answers to or you've figured them out, then suddenly you find yourself saying "god, I don't know." I don't know about this aspect of gravity or whatever. But it is hard, for sure. When I made the first record for RCA, my son was five months old and I have a pretty close parenting style so I was down in New York, my husband was with the baby in the Mayflower Hotel and I was in the studio laying down the tracks. "That's good, I'm going 'cause I got to go nurse that baby. See ya later." So it's pretty intense to have something that really does have a priority over music — nothing did in that way before I had children.

What is the connection for you between music and spirituality?

DE: There's no difference.

That's interesting. Can you elaborate?

DE: No. (laughter)

Well, all right. Let's stretch. Are there any parallels between giving birth to a child and giving birth to a song? People who create art often talk about their creations as their children and since you're talking so much about children, I'm wondering if there is a comparison for you?

DE: Yeah, I wonder about that. On one level, in having kids I realize how much my art is about myself.

Really. What does that mean?

DE: It's about being really able to ponder the wonders of life in all their beauty and agony and say something about them, say something about them that you really mean. And I don't think that part of having kids is like that really, but there is the aspect of having children where you are passing on some sense of the wonder of life to them. Kind of guiding them through the world and of course the things that really matter to you and are important to you are going to be apparent to them. So in that way, there really is a connection. But when I don't have time for music, that's when I realize that it's really something for myself, an aspect of me that I need to express. I think it's great for kids to grow up in a musical household, and it probably influences them in ways I

don't even know. On the other hand, if I just stayed home and made spaghetti sauce and didn't go to the gig, I'm not sure it would matter all that much to my kids.

Since we're talking about passing things along in a sense, have you ever received any words of wisdom from a teacher or mentor that inspired you or that you want to pass along?

DE: Something that always comes back to me in dealing with the compromises of life, and now I don't even know who said it, but some spiritual leader said, "The world of beauty is full of fleas." And that sums up a lot of the way I feel about life sometimes. I really feel like that everything that is beautiful about life is always present, but there are also fleas and you've got to be able to learn to see the beauty for the fleas. That's kind of like the forest for the trees.

Do you have any personal goals or something particular that you want to accomplish before you leave the planet?

DE: Yeah. I do. It's interesting, you know, at this point of my life, it's less about a certain kind of ambition, I think. (long pause) There are a few things in music, moments on records when I feel like I've gotten it. I do know for sure in performance ... there are times when I think I've really expressed what is meaningful to me about being here. I feel like I've done that in performance and I feel like I'd like to continue to do it. And I'm writing some stuff that's getting closer to it also. So, the musical aspiration is to get out of the way of what I want to say and really be able to say it.

Any personal aspirations outside of music?

DE: I don't know. I'd say music is pretty woven into the texture of my life. You said, "what's the difference between spiritual life and musical life." I really don't feel there's a difference. I feel like music puts me completely in touch with what I guess people would call a spiritual life. I guess the aspiration is to keep that union.

What do you like most about being a musician?

DE: (pause) It's cool. (laughter)

You know I can't just let you off with that phrase.

DE: There are so many things that are great about it, actually. There's the fact that, as I was just saying, it's so ongoing. The more you see about life, the more you're around, the more you hear, the more you understand other people, the more there is to say. And, hopefully, the better you can get at it. You look at some of these incredible musicians who've been playing for so long, I mean, it's very very deep. I don't really see people mastering jazz and then getting out of it, as they might in other professions. It's a real companion in that way. There's often such a great community of musicians. I was out in Michigan doing an artist-in-residency in March and an old friend of mine, a trumpet player, said, "You know this really is a noble profession." And it is. There are just a lot of people with a lot of integrity, especially as you get older ... because everybody has taken their lumps and paid some dues.

What do you like least about being a musician?

DE: I don't mind that jazz occupies such a marginal place in the culture. I don't mind it so much because in some ways it keeps it very special. But the fact that it doesn't allow people to work as much as they might, that's frustrating. It's frustrating for me but it's also frustrating to see other musicians and to think, "God, this person's really great. Why aren't they out there all the time doing this? Why is everybody sitting in front of their entertainment center at night?" It's frustrating to me because I live this kind of double life sitting on my lawn in suburbia, and I'm definitely the only jazz singer on the block. I feel thirsty for something. It can't be everything to buy a big old sports utility vehicle and get your kids to soccer on time, and hope the Nasdaq doesn't fall anymore. I think people are really thirsty for something and probably not everybody is thirsty for jazz, but just

the communion that happens between people to see somebody perform; I get it when I go see somebody perform. But people live fast. There's no leisure time and I think that as that happens, jazz and live music get pushed farther to the margins. And that's hard.

Do you have any opinions on the direction or the future of jazz?

DE: Well, people say jazz is dead, and I say, "Well then, it's having a great after-life." You know, there's all the clichés: Where are the Coltranes, the Miles Davises, and stuff, but maybe it's not about that right now. Certainly I've heard enough music in my lifetime to feel like it's very much alive. Improvised American music ... doesn't even have to be American music ... but that falls within what we call jazz, there's something too interesting going on for it to just fall by the wayside. I don't really care where it goes, you know, as long as it's taking in what life is about. If it's becoming some prepackaged thing and some nostalgic thing that's lost its relevance and becomes a museum piece, that's not too attractive to me. But I doubt that that will happen completely. It's always had levels of popularity and things that are popular at times and things that are not popular, but I think it's too rich a tradition and also too much about growing and changing to really end as we know it. I think it's healthy in its own regard.

Do you ever feel the need to reconcile your musical leanings or desires with the market or commercial demands?

DE: It's interesting because my entire jazz career, people have always said, "maybe there's some complicated things going on in your music, but I really feel like it can reach a lot of people." I feel like you don't want to leave people out on purpose because people that can come along, that's great. But the thing is that if you change what you do, then that's what you have to do for people and that's not that interesting to me. I'm much more interested in getting closer to what it is that I feel about life and want to express, and that's what's interesting to me to share with the audience. I don't really feel very capable of changing that.

As a teacher you are in the catbird seat for observing young people in music today. What do you see today?

DE: In jazz education some things are easier for people to learn. For instance, when I was coming up, there was nobody like me at the Conservatory for vocalists. There was nobody you could study vocal technique, improvisation, ear training theory and all those things, with. For me, I had to go and study with different instrumentalists. Like I said, I studied with Dave Holland at one point, and a number of other people. I studied with classical singers for technique. So in some ways, things are easier for people now. And people have a lot of skill, consequently. But just speaking about singers, when I grew up I went and heard Ella Fitzgerald. I'm only 43; it's not like she was my influence or the first person I heard but she was around and singing and I heard her, and I heard Sarah Vaughan. I didn't hear Billie Holiday, of course, but I heard Betty Carter and lots of other people, Carmen McRae, people who this generation of singers, unless they had their parents take them to hear stuff, if they are college age right now, probably never heard. And so they feel loss of a connection to those people, and that's hard.

What impact does that loss have on younger musicians and singers?

DE: For me, since I felt that connection to those singers, I didn't have to be them because they were doing that, so I could do something else. And I think this generation of singers, that's kind of a struggle for them. It's like "Wow. What do these standards mean? I don't understand this." Or "I have to only be straight-ahead." People are thinking a little bit more in categories. But at the same time, people write to me from all over the world and they've heard my records and some say, "I'm doing jazz singing and I'm studying ... and this is inspiring to me." I feel like there's no shortage of people who, you know, younger people, who are really interested in the music.

Do you encourage young people to go into jazz. Do you have a message for them?

DE: It depends on the individual, obviously. But when somebody has gotten to the college level and they are serious enough about singing jazz, yes, I encourage them. I've never been of the school that believes that harder is better because if they really want it bad enough, they'll stay in. That's kind of the old school. I've had a lot of very successful students who've gone on to have good performing careers so I'm actually pretty optimistic that people are really going to stick to it and do well.

Anybody you want to plug?

DE: One of my students right now who's writing a lot of great music and doing a lot of great singing is a singer named Luciana Souza. She just had a record of her own come out on Sunny Side.

That must make you feel good.

DE: It's great. It's totally great. And then there's a number of people who maybe aren't quite as high visibility as she is, but here in Boston are pretty well known Singers like named Lisa Thorson and Patrice Williamson is also quite a good singer.

So you get to go out and hear your own students perform and make a living.

DE: Yeah. It's great. So I'm pretty encouraging. But I also am encouraging them to be very clear-headed about what it takes to really stick to your ideas. And also, how deeply you need to go into the music ... the need to really learn what it is you have to say. Sometimes people are a little bit afraid of that.

Is there any project that you're currently working on that you'd like to talk about?

DE: I got a call from a major label in the early part of this year, saying we're very interested in you and what are you writing? They wanted to hear a demo of all originals. That's when I realized what was going on with my composing process because I had very few things on paper. But I realized that I had lots of new songs in my head, kind of like imaginary friends. I had a full roster of tunes that I'd been cultivating over the past year and a half and hadn't necessarily had the time to write them down. So I quite quickly pulled together a new demo of nine original tunes. We'll see what happens. They've not announced anything as far as what is going to happen with jazz on that particular label, so who knows. But in the meantime, it really gave me the interest to get these tunes written down and I've written some new stuff since then. I'm not quite sure if I'll do the project as all originals or not. I have to see how they all fit together as one piece. That's one thing. Once you kind of get the music out and you've performed it, then you can say, "Okay, this needs to get recorded." And the other thing is that I've been doing some duo performances with Fred Hersch, and we have something coming up at the Regatta Bar in November. We're old friends and we've been doing duo things for years now, but we did one in April and we're going to do it again in November, so we're stepping it up a little bit. That's a really exciting project for me.

What has been the best moment of your life to date, musical or personal?

DE: (long pause) It's so funny, you know, because my son always asks me questions like, "Mom, what's you favorite color?" And I realize that you kind of get to middle age and you mitigate all these things. I don't really have a favorite color. I say... boy, what would I say? I'd probably frame it in a kind of life or death one which was when my second son was born, his umbilical chord was wrapped around his neck twice. The midwife and the nurse are saying, "Push. Push." And you're pushing like, I mean, it's just unbelievable. You're really pushing. You've never known pushing 'til then. And suddenly they say, "Don't push," and it was like holding back the tide. It's such an overwhelming physical sensation. And so suddenly I realized something was going on. It was very scary and he came out and he was blue. The midwife was able to cut the chord and then he started breathing. I'd have to say that's one of the happiest moments, and probably because it was offset by one of the scariest moments of my life.

I'm not even going to ask you now what the worst moment was because I think you just told me. Instead, let's talk about the media. Do you ever read your own press?

DE: Yeah, I do.

Do you have any favorite accolades or descriptions? Something that someone said that you particularly liked or disliked?

DE: There was a piece in the Boston Phoenix - I wonder if I can quote it.

Paraphrase it.

DE: Something about a voice full of, I don't know, knowingness and humor and sensuality ... or something ... from which joy has not been extinguished.

Wow.

DE: I loved that, but I'd like to just add a word, to insert a little caret in there and write the word "yet." It doesn't sound to me like you will ever lose that joy. Thank you for sharing your time with Jazz Improv today. DE: It was my pleasure.

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