

Audrey Ochoa: “I Just Like to Write Songs!”

By **Raul da Gama** - June 14, 2019



Audrey Ochoa has designs on her career. “Deep down,” she says, “I just want to be a pop star!” She’s much already as she looks every bit the part and is mostly up for playing it too. But don’t be fooled by her flippant serious musician who sees herself – and *is* indeed – not only part of a long line of musicians and despite a v schedule she never fails to do the right things right.

Whether she’s writing music, or playing it in scores of settings on stage or in the studio, she never stops creating long, inventions of a phrase that she sculpts seemingly out of the air with her trombone, or seductively bending a breathtaking glissando she has discovered on the spot... No matter what she is doing on any given time of away at the façade that is standing between her and where she wants to be.

...TODAY I’M DANGEROUSLY CLOSE TO IDENTIFYING MYSELF AS AN ARTIST”

So if you felt that Miss Ochoa sets about creating feelings you’ll find a large measure of truth in that. All the tempo, dynamics and emotion, activated by the vibrations as her lips engage the air from her lungs singing, gliding tubing. This is the means by which Ochoa creates fine texture and timbre; her sense of spatial scale rhythmic energy, and pure emotion in a kinetic response to combative, hair-trigger dynamic musical contrasts.

For proof of all of the above, look no further than the present recording, *Afterthought*, a mesmeric album full of beckoning genius. Audrey Ochoa’s inventions are redolent of light-handed glissandos and mercurial arpeggiated charm and wit. The disc consists of eight works of unsurpassed beauty. Each song is alive with personal and imaginative possibility. Ochoa’s compositions are graceful, fluent and affectionate. Of course there is a lot that Ochoa does. She recently revealed much of it in this freewheeling interview with the Toronto Music Report.

Toronto Music Report: You know that you’re part of a very small tribe – Melba Liston and the women trombonists to have cut two albums as leader?



Audrey Ochoa: There are a few female trombone leaders in music. Melissa Gardiner and Karin Hammar, to name a couple, don't know any in Canada but admittedly I haven't looked to talk Melba Liston in a bit but to answer the second part of the question, I felt like a declaration of my existence to the world, the second part of the album was about getting to know me.

TMR: What's the response been to *Afterthought*?

AO: The response has been overwhelmingly positive and it's unbelievable. I was able to get some play on US college radio (via Chronograph records) in the US too. I was also booked in Greensboro and Wilmington and elsewhere.

TMR: What was it like making the album? Did your experience change when going into the studio the second time around?

AO: Making *Afterthought* was relaxed. It had no deadlines, no producer, so there were no expectations. The successful grant application and we didn't (dare) veer from my written proposal. I had a producer, the great Tommy, who gave me the shots and I like to describe my experience on that as being a spectator for much of it. And rightfully so, I had quite a bit to learn. Tommy was so decisive and experienced.

The second time around on *Afterthought*, I self-produced and financed it myself and had more of an interest in the music. I felt entitled to take a few more risks. For example, when I recorded "Afterthought" (track 6) it was originally planned to be a drum solo, but my logic was, "Who cares if this is a bad idea... it's my money I can do what I want." Instead of a clear and concise plan, I experimented and took turns.

TMR: Did you have to produce as well? What was that like?

AO: I still don't totally understand what a producer's role is on a jazz album- I feel like it's just a sober third party that can take the best of both worlds without any skin in the game. So to that end I liked being producer. But seriously, all I did was produce. And that collaborative approach, where I could ask Sandro for something and Mike could change it or I could discuss changing the form to better suit a drum solo or whatever... All of that was great.

Raul da Gama

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I’m not a rhythm section player so there are a lot of things I don’t consider. It was great to have a dialogue having the final say about how my tunes were going to sound was an amazing feeling. I had to learn to trust one who could assure me I was making the right choices. No producer, no co-leader. I wasn’t concerned with granting body or anyone but myself, which was nice.

TMR: As a trombonist and composer/arranger yourself, is Melba Liston a role model for you?

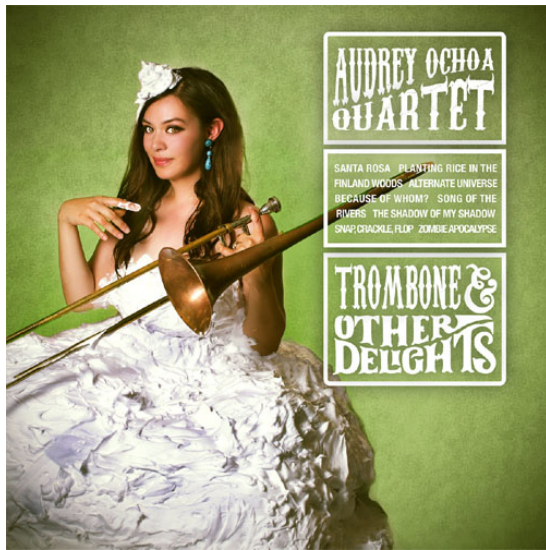
AO: I’d never heard Melba Liston’s name until I was 21 and doing a Banff Residency. I can’t say she was a role model. I never spoke of her, or recommended her, and I didn’t listen to her album growing up. When I did check her out, I was sort of letdown. I look back and realise how my own internalised ideas of what a woman could do were getting into her as a player- the whole “she’s ok for a girl” attitude. I’ll give you an example: I transcribed a piece by Duke Ellington in Junior-High (I found his album in the public library) and he’s by no means a technical monster, or a language expert. I just liked it. so I learned it. It didn’t matter that he couldn’t shred. I just liked his lines.

I’M INSPIRED BY PEOPLE WHO CAN TELL A STORY

By the time I discovered Melba Liston I wasn’t able to listen to her playing without being disappointed that she wasn’t like the men I’d been studying. I wanted her to be a heroine; a super musician that would prove once and for all that we could dominate as well. It’s unfortunate because I didn’t even allow myself to hear what she was really about: musicality, phrases. Nothing. At least now I can appreciate her and her struggle without the need to compare her to men. And I have the children’s book *Little Melba and her Big Horn* on my coffee table.

TMR: Do you follow – and feel inspired by – anyone else from yesteryears or today? (Hint: Al Grey, Dickie Wells, and experimental like Albert Mangelsdorf or Roswell Rudd... or folks like Wycliffe Gordon...)

AO: I love Roswell Rudd. I have an album that’s him and Enrico Rava- I bought it on a high school trip to Italy. I was a “trombone-centric” improviser before I heard that album. He embraces the things that make trombone unique. I also loved that album (the Enrico Rava Quartet, Roswell Rudd, J.F. Jenny Clark and Aldo Romano) because it was so much fun to listen to.



just these two brass-masters playing with reckless abandon sound “like a saxophone”. Just great. I also love Ray Anderson not perfect playing, but no matter what they’re doing they are people who can tell a story. Wycliffe is amazing, as is Mars Hill technique.

I also love vocalists, and am constantly trying to emulate Beyonce and Rihanna fan. And I would love to sound like a trombone if I could.

TMR: Where do you see yourself in the (music) continuum you’re going?

AO: 5 years ago I would have said, “I’m a jobber...” today identifying as “an artist”. I’m going to keep writing music and a third album that’s going to be released in March (2020). I’m working with bigger ensembles as well. I’m bound to happen eventually). And I created a ska-orchestra in Edmonton and we did a show of ska-arrange

All I want is to write and play music with people, for an audience that enjoys it. I’ll go wherever I can get th

TMR: Do you have a game plan to get you there?

AO: All the best things started happening when I stopped planning and just started saying yes to different p my plan is to say yes to as much as I can without burning out.

TMR: Do you write music? Enjoy it?

AO: I love writing music. I think it’s a part of the tradition of jazz.

TMR: Writing... on the piano or another instrument?

AO: I write with voice, piano, guitar and lastly trombone. A lot of what I’ve written has lyrics as deep down

TMR: Where do you think your music comes from?

AO: I think it’s an aggregate of my musical diet from the last 34 years. It’s also something that is in my family musicians, that is. I feel like I’m carrying the torch for them too. My father was a trumpet player with the E before that in the Manila symphony, his uncle was principal trumpet, his other uncle was principal trombone “Where I come from, the name ‘Ochoa’ is known as ‘musician’”. So it’s important to me.

TMR: Is there ever a spiritual moment?

AO: Yes. Every once in a while you’ll have a moment when playing where everything lines up; the musician rare. So I chase after those moments. No one person can take credit for those moments.

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TMR: Where do you stand on: Composition or improvisation? Structured or Free Improv?

AO: Improvisation is just spontaneous composition. I think they’re the same thing really. Good improv, even there are rules that are agreed upon- and some music forms have fewer rules, but there’s still an agreement just like any conversation, if you’re stuck talking to someone who doesn’t listen and doesn’t care what you say that’s what bad free improv is to me.

TMR: Are you relatively busy these days?

AO: I’m very busy; but busy doing different things. Casinos, musicals, recording whatever. Brass quartets, arranging. Whatever. I say yes to as much as I can. I get regular sideman work. Fun fact: I was the trombone of “Hadestown” which just won best musical at the Tony’s. I got a ton of press and feedback from that gig. In places I find myself working. Engagements as leader are less frequent.

TMR: What’s a regular day like for you?

AO: I teach. I work a fulltime job teaching music in a school and I love it. and it’s how I financed the album



TMR: Do you do any teaching?

AO: Yes (with a big smile), but not privately. In fact I discourage teaching or teaching others “how to improvise” especially as it feels like I’m imposing my voice onto someone who’s just starting out.

TMR: Is music all you do? Does it pay the bills?

AO: I tried to make a living just as a musician in my 20s and I guess and then in 2014 I thought I might just quit music as I was quite sick of being broke. I always thought teaching for music... and that I’d be some kind of sell-out. Instead I just do other jobs, it works for me.

TMR: I know we love our artists and treat them better than the Canadian scene like for you as especially as someone who is a woman of color.

AO: The Edmonton Arts Council and Alberta Foundation for the arts are very active. They might not be any government... (fingers-crossed). They support a lot of different projects, and I have nothing but excellent thank yous and provincial support of the arts. The number of festivals and arts initiatives is great and we, despite being a small city, have a lot of exposure to national and international performers especially with our club, The Yardbird Suite (our jazz club). We have national and international acts 10 months out of the year. Canada Council is supporting this upcoming tour so there are a lot of things to say about Canada Council too.

THE FIRST ALBUM FELT LIKE A DECLARATION OF MY TO THE WORLD, THE SECOND ALBUM FELT LIKE I WAS PEOPLE TO GET TO KNOW ME

TMR: Do you get around? Vancouver... Montreal... Toronto...?

AO: I get around to British Columbia, I played the Montreal Jazz Fest in 2012. I play Toronto with singer-songwriter and I played there with a blues band. I also played there with a Francophone artist from here in Edmonton (Cristina) and Mexico with a Francophone group. I mentioned before, Dallas, North Carolina and Memphis.

TMR: Do you have an agent and do you get PR help?

AO: All my PR help is coordinated through my label, Chronograph, and its president, Stephanie Hutchinson, who is doing a great job for the success of my album.

TMR: I know the Hutchinsons’ do a fabulous job where you are, especially as Kodi is a musician too and Stephanie is a mom. It must be rushed and schedules rather tight... Tell me what it was like to work with them?

AO: I rarely deal with Kodi outside of seeing him on gigs or festivals. Stephanie is unbelievable; she is thorough and very connected. You’d think that having a child would have slowed her (and Kodi) down but they’re always available when dealing with my hiccups and mistakes. Your earlier question about “where I see my career going” shows that she has the vision. I just like to write songs.