

# JOËLLE LÉANDRE

## Lifetime Rebel

BY JOHN SHARPE

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Now 71, French bassist Joëlle Léandre (born September 12, 1951) is a consummate improviser who allies unrivalled facility with boundless imagination. Her early performances were in the field of New Music, especially focused on the works of John Cage and Giacinto Scelsi, who both composed pieces specifically for her. It wasn't until she met the iconoclastic English guitarist Derek Bailey in New York in 1980 that her dedication to free improvisation really took flight. She has long since outgrown explicit influences, but they still inform her authoritative tone, incantatory phrasing, rich color palette and openness to theatricality and humor. Having performed on over 240 albums, and over the years, she has recorded with about everyone, from Anthony Braxton, George Lewis, William Parker, Marilyn Crispell, John Zorn and Steve Lacy, to a slew of up-and-coming talent. As such, she is a worthy recipient of the annual Vision Festival Lifetime Achievement Award, to be presented to her at Roulette this month.

As a woman from a working class background, operating in what is largely a male-dominated art form, Léandre's journey has not been straightforward. She studied at the local conservatory in Aix-en-Provence before pursuing her education in Paris. Although she was still on the classical music career track, it was here that African-American music first made its mark, firing up a lifelong passion and independence of spirit. "I was 19 years old. It was the American Center. I'm a child of free jazz. I was there to listen. Bill Dixon, Frank Wright, Rashied Ali, Anthony Braxton, Art Ensemble of Chicago, Frank Lowe. When these men played, they gave me the sense of jubilation. The sense of freedom to effectively play your shit. I talk about Afro-American music. They create and invent for different reasons, political and other things. And this always was attractive."

Although Léandre largely performed contemporary new music over the next decade, working with composers Pierre Boulez, Morton Feldman, Cage and Scelsi, she also rebelled against the straitjacket of playing other people's scores and increasingly turned to improvisation. Her fearless approach manifested itself early on when a solo concert for London's Actual Music festival in the late '70s unexpectedly became a duo with German bassist Peter Kowald. She grasped what proved a pivotal moment. "Kowald invited me to Wuppertal. If you play in Wuppertal, you play in Berlin. There's a mafia. I was invited to play, (and) record with different musicians." Such adventurousness has defined her career. She sets out her credo: "If tomorrow on the street a person goes to me, 'Oh Madame Léandre, I know who you are, I have a project, we could have three or four gigs', then I say 'Yes!' I was ready for this adventure, because life is just so risky. Many people have only one job, the same employer. I don't have a day that's like another day. Never. So I'm a nomad. I'm a gypsy."

It was on a year's scholarship to New York that the significant turning point occurred: encountering Derek Bailey, who she credits as the spiritual father of European free improvisation, at one of his Company presentations. She recalls: "I went there, and I went to talk with Derek because that's my character. He says 'Oh, Joëlle, we have to play together. We have to try.' You do your best and we go and we improvise. It was in 1980. We played all day and

drank tea, talking about Boulez, about free music, about lots of things." She forged yet more connections when Bailey subsequently asked her to join another Company week a few months later with Bill Laswell, Zorn and others; the next year he called on her to play a trio with Evan Parker for the BBC.

Even though renowned as an improviser, Léandre is dismissive of the idea that what she plays is totally free. "Improvisation means something. We are not free. Free music means nothing for me. When you have an instrument in your hand, [you] are not free. When you improvise, it's a selection. It's a kind of continuous composition." Certainly, listening to her play, the sense of form she conveys is striking. How could it be any other way? "I played New Music for ten years. You learn about a lot of things if you have an open mind. I learned about form, structure, music [from] a lot of different composers. When I improvise, I compose. Yes, to give a sense of repetition, organization, validation, themes. Everything has a sense, an organization, in terms of memory, how you start, who you play with, instrumentation. The first sound and you're on the train and you become responsible to the other ones around. That's why for me improvisation equals first collective—it's collective music. It's instrumental music, and definitely for me it's a chamber music."

It was through Kowald that Léandre first met William Parker in Berlin. Duets, quartets and other collaborations ensued and she subsequently became close friends with Parker and his wife Patricia Nicholson. The bassist was in New York in 1984 for the groundbreaking Sound Unity Festival, the precursor to Vision Festival at which she has appeared some nine times since its inception in 1996. Consequently, in spite of a garlanded career, the Lifetime Achievement Award means a lot to her: "I'm so excited you cannot imagine. I play a lot in America. I go to America one or two times a year. I was so happy and so touched, because this really comes from the Afro-American community, not only, but mostly. And I play with them. They adopted me years ago."

Léandre has consistently championed women's place in improvised music. She was an important part of the European Women's Improvising Group and in 1960 co-founded Les Diaboliques, a pioneering trio with Swiss pianist Irène Schweizer and Scottish vocalist Maggie Nicols. She explains the rationale: "Why not? Women had to be there. We played more than 35 years together. It was the only woman band in Europe. You can play in an apartment, but the live music, to have the gigs, to be on tour...nada. Of course it's political. Women create the same, they invent the same, they do a lot the same, so why not play together? Because men forget to invite us." Continuing that mission, the first of her dedicated four sets being presented at the Vision Festival will be the Tiger Trio. This project features Léandre with pianist Myra Melford and flutist Nicole Mitchell, who met when the bassist was teaching at Mills College in California.

Mitchell describes the attraction: "Joëlle Léandre is a true hero in creative music as a trailblazing woman who has taken the music to great heights in Europe and beyond for decades. As a musician's musician, her fearlessness, unstoppable innovation and virtuosity shine

bright inspiration to countless listeners. She has created a seamless improvisational language that combines her heart for humanity, her humor and her sound in ways that will never be able to be imitated."

She will also be playing in another trio at the Vision Festival, with longstanding partner, violist Mat Maneri, and pianist Craig Taborn. Over the course of 27 years, her association with Maneri has included the Stone Quartet and the Judson Trio, an intense cooperative unit (with drummer Gerald Cleaver) notable for its sparkling discourse. Léandre is characteristically effusive about Taborn: "I tell you, I could say he's number one in a way, but never mind. He's so good, so rich, and natural, and [such a] great improviser. You have to understand how I met Craig. More than 20 years ago we had a concert with Les Diaboliques in France in Touraine, a festival. We started first, and the second band was with Craig. And afterward he came to me and said, 'We have to play together.'" Now, finally, they have. This will be their second performance together following a date at the French Sons d'hiver festival in February 2022, which can be heard on the wonderful, just released *hEARoes* (RogueArt).

There's also a performance at The Vision with acclaimed poet Fred Moten. Although this is the first time they have performed together, Léandre is very familiar with the format, working with dancers and poets. Does she play differently in these situations than when interacting with other musicians? "I listen to the texts, the word, the meaning. I can be with or against. I have my vocabulary as a bass player, of course, but the attention, the listening... You have to be careful because the verse, the text, has to be heard to be listened [to] by the audience also. You have to care for the balance, and in terms of volume." For the finale she will debut a new composition showcasing an all-star cast of American improvisers. "I have less than two months to put together the score. It will be seven musicians on stage, my friends, me on bass, with Mat Maneri, Joe Morris, Fred Lonberg-Holm, Jason Kao Hwang, Ingrid Laubrock, Steve Swell. I will be busy—I arrive early. We have a day's septet rehearsal!"

But whatever the lineup, Léandre's passion is sure to shine through. "Even at my age I keep this rage, and this is political. I have this fire, I don't know where it comes from; it's just me. I kept this utopia to change the world, because, of course, I'm a rebel. We have to change the world, and art can change the world."

For more info visit [joelle-leandre.com](http://joelle-leandre.com). Léandre receives a Lifetime Achievement Award and performs at Roulette Jun. 13 as part of Vision Festival. See Calendar.

#### Recommended Listening:

- Joëlle Léandre — *Taxi* (Adda, 1981-82)
- Irène Schweizer/Joëlle Léandre — *Cordial Gratin* (FMP, 1986)
- John Cage/Joëlle Léandre — *The Wonderful Widow of Eighteen Springs* (Montaigne, 1995)
- Sylvie Courvoisier/Joëlle Léandre/Susie Ibarra — *Passaggio* (Intakt, 2001)
- Tiger Trio — *Unleashed* (RogueArt, 2016)
- Joëlle Léandre — *Zürich Concert* (Intakt, 2022)