

Interview with Sara Lowenthal - 6th March 2023

Interviewer: Tone Davies Summariser: Rozanne Gomes

Audio: Maggie Perrin

Born 1959, Hammersmith, London. Parents were teachers, mother also trained as a singer.

- Musical Interest - Older brother played Beethoven to her. Started piano aged 5, some percussion, violin aged 8. Wanted a double bass but too expensive. Lucky to have got a double bass at a lower price later.
- Got into the music business at Chiswick college. Hammersmith Philharmonic Orchestra got paid £20. Got odd paid gig - mainly orchestral. Applied to Royal College, didn't get in. Became a sound engineer instead. By chance joined a band - gigged for 4 years with Reggae Philharmonic Orchestra.
- First session - aged 16 with her brother - he wrote the songs. Played trombone - session paid for £50. Not sure of the name of the studio, doesn't exist anymore. Fantastic experience in studio.
- Different studios - played in bedrooms all the way to Air/ Abbey Road. Everywhere!
- Challenges- getting work - playing sessions as a double bass. Classically trained, not jazz so much, but could play it.
- Reggae Philharmonic - out as a string section. Played Soul 11 Soul, Maxi Priest. Did sessions as a singer, also steel pan.
- Obtaining session work - Lots came through her brother. Phil Manzanera - got her a job for 2 years as singer. Engineer too. RPO after that. She's a copyist now - prepares sheet music for sessions. Has used a fixer. Produced music with brother. Association of British Calypsonians. Instruments - percussion, congas, timbales, steel pan, orchestral percussion - professionally, piano, trombone, double bass.
- Typical Day - eg. 10-1pm - Inspector Morse recordings, source music recorded at the end. Pop sessions more relaxed -different vibe.
- Skills & Qualities- Good at what you do, adaptability, flexibility, dependable.
- Creative process - (hard to recall) 'Feel Free' track - some tweaking. 'Keep on Moving' - they worked out parts between them first, recognised it would be a hit.

'Back to Life' - Olympic Studio, Barnes. Singers background- tried things out, most evolved in studio - not really written down - played by rote - similar to singing.

- Biggest fear - having to sight-read Stockhausen! That you can't cut it. Anecdote - sample session, hurt foot, but thought can't damage her bass!
- Atmosphere - happy to work together, shouted at by Barry because of gap in the track - she reacted! Unusual for her.
- Backgrounds of session players - Reggae Philharmonic - most were classically trained, some had been in bands already. Orchestral - all classical. Background - working class/middle class - everything. Camaraderie amongst musicians because they were musicians! Jazzy B was larger than life. Barry T - brother's best friend - big character. Sly Dunbar, Mikey Chung and Maxi Priest.
- Stereotypes: Women's roles - mainly backing vocals for years - anecdote- 'Sheila Blythe and Norma Knocker'. At college, still stereotyped. Women 'seen not heard or heard but unrecognised'. Racism - none personally, but it exists. Comments heard- 'Black musicians playing classical - what's that about?' More black string players now. Anecdote- things have changed for the better. Classical - 'not dead white man's music' anymore.
- Special studio; CTS - Inspector Morse was recorded there, did string arrangements. Lots gone now eg, Olympic, are more special.
- Payment - Orchestra -check on the day, sign release form from fixer. RPO - get paid when you get paid! Had to wait a long time.
- Accreditation - with Soul 11 Soul - only RPO. Under her own name when with her brother. Early days not credited, less in the 80s, but afterwards more so. Depending on the artist, they would add your name. Orchestral films there was nothing. Albums - accredited.
- Difficulties - Financially not enough money for her, didn't do many sessions. Not being able to play, (hurting your hands) terrified of losing hearing!
- Work/ Family life balance- No kids, not a problem, was single, married now but okay. Knows tough for some session players.
- Memorable session - 'Back to Life' was a collaborative creative process session. She's done string arrangements - personally very satisfying! Invisibility was nice. Good feeling to be part of something so influential (emotional) A great experience. 'Cherubim & Seraphim' - Inspector Morse episode used classical Mozart and

needed to be recreated as can't use originals - she was the only bass, feels good to know it's her playing.

- Technological changes- not much re: sessions, she moved to being a copyist- is meticulous. Tech helped people create music who aren't trained musically.
- Instrument she'd love to play- bassoon or the piano better, baritone sax/ bass clarinet.